Romantic WESTERN

MAY 15¢

LOVE'S RENEGADE

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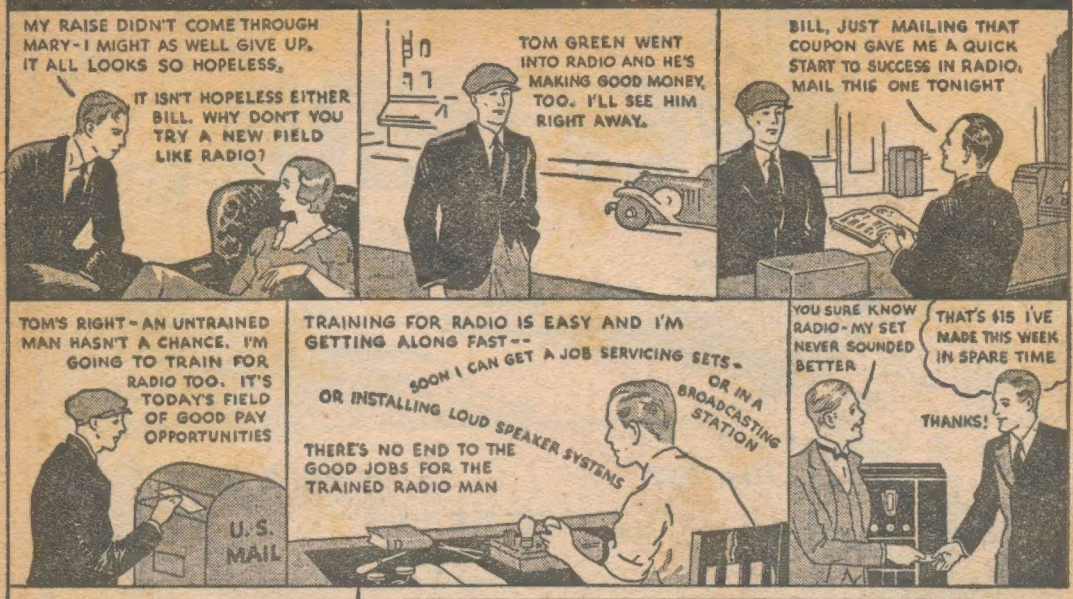
Romantic Western - May 1938

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED—THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!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Romantic WESTERN

May, 1938 Vol. 2, No. 5

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ROMANTIC WESTERN is published bi-monthly by Trojan Publishing Corporation, 2242 Grove Street, Chicago, Ill. Editorial and Executive offices at 125 East Forty-sixth Street, New York, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter October 28, 1937, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under the act of March 3, 1879. Subscription: Yearly, 75c; single copy, 15c. Canadian and foreign postage extra. Manuscripts should be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope and are submitted at the author's risk. Copyright 1938 by Trojan Publishing Corporation. Registration of title applied for at U. S. Patent Office.

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Spanish Gold

Pottery shattered on his head and his shotgun poured both charges into the wall.

THICK walled adobes flanked the broad, dusty street whose red clay powdered under the high heels of lean men, men who were awkward on foot, and who hated the long walk from the hitching rack to the bat-wing doors of Lincoln's saloons.

These were bronzed men, with eyes sun-squinting from long facing the glare of New Mexico's great *mesa*. They wore broad brimmed Stetsons. Their blue jeans reached down over the low tops of their boots. For the rest, they preferred vests which would keep out the

One man can't declare a private war! But Tex Baylor was seeing red, and, by God! he didn't care how many of them there were, nor how much the Law was backing them up! About the women in the case? It took him a long time to see what was what

evening chill, yet lacking sleeves, so they would not be hampered in getting a gun into action.

A red haired girl leaned against the jamb of an open door. Her short skirt exposed her silken legs and hugged closely the curve of hip and waist. Her bodice was tight-fitting, the low cut neckline

By HAMLIN DALY

exposing smooth, white skin to the afternoon sun and to every roving eye. She beckoned, and said, "Come on in, Tex. Honest, I won't hurt you!"

Good humored mockery animated a strikingly pretty face that was not yet marred by the fine, hard lines which accented her rouged mouth. Tex Baylor gave her an amiable grin, and drawled, "Mebbe some other time, Maureen."

He strode on, his heels bending under the long leg stretch and the lean frame whose length disguised his weight.

"Shucks, Tex," reproved his stocky companion, casting a wistful glance backward, "she's shore sweet on you. Tain't right, yore bein' so high nosed. Maureen ain't like them gals in the Mescalero Palace."

Knife River Morell might as well have added, "I kind of like her myself."

Baylor did not slacken his pace. Ahead, two massive 'dobes faced each other. Both had deep set doorways, and were fronted by shadowy arcades. They glared at each other like angry giants.

The one on the right was the bank owned by Conway Pratt, king of the Pecos district. On the left was the answering challenge, a neatly lettered sign that announced, "Bennings & Baylor, Private Bank & General Merchandise."

White haired Amos Bennings emerged from his doorway just as Tex and his partner stalked by. He was lean as a musket barrel, and just as straight. Since Tex, his partner's son, had already stopped in with a message from the Baylor ranch, there was no greeting exchanged, other than a nod and raised hand.

Knife River's freckled face broadened in a grin as they passed.

"Tex," he jibed, "yuh afeard that old man Bennings'll tell yore dad yuh was talking tuh Maureen? Or mebbe yo're gittin' refined-like, since Anne come tuh town?"

"You young pole cat," grumbled Baylor, catching him by the shirt collar, "I'll shake yuh loose from yore eye teeth. What's Anne got to do with it?"

"Leggo, yuh ornery coyote," protested the towheaded waddy, "or I'll tell Anne yuh was consorting with wimmin in Fort Sumner, and jest pertending tuh be pious when yuh comes to Lincoln."

Baylor let go. Knife River Morell would tell his sister almost anything at all, and later, penitently insist it had been "jest fer fun."

They headed for the lunch counter. Anne Morell's smile and blonde loveliness had put the restaurant on the map. She and her brother hoped that between them they could save enough to buy a few cattle and establish a brand. Bennings & Baylor would finance them.

"Hello, honey," Tex greeted, gray eyes brightening as he watched the sun gilding Anne's softly waved hair. "Knife River's still sober as a jedge, and we're both honing for some vittles."

"If you don't skip that 'honey' stuff," Anne retorted, "someone'll think you like me, and I'd be awfully embarrassed." But her blue-eyed twinkle took the sting from that.

Anne had to maintain an "arm's length" attitude. Her shapely figure would have been pinched black and blue, all in good humored horseplay, if she ever gave these cowpunchers half a chance.

As she deftly plopped the eggs on the griddle, she said to her brother, "I know you've not got the sense of a hoot owl, but try to keep a level head."

Anne's eyes were grave, and a little frown crinkled her smooth brow. Tex saw that as her glance shifted to include him. He read her full meaning, and assured her, "Shucks, Anne! I ain't getting your brother into gun trouble. Now what's worryin' you?"

She answered, "The sheriff's attached your dad's store. And he's sending a posse out to grab his livestock."

Baylor's lean face darkened. He drawled, but with an iron undertone, "I don't like gun fighting any better than you do; but keeping level headed has its limits, honey. I won't get your brother mixed up in our troubles."

Knife River cut in, "Hell, sis! Pratt's personal sheriff kain't touch old man Baylor's private hosses and cow critters! That there lawsuit jest covers the pardnership stuff, like the bank and store."

"You don't know the sheriff," Anne went on. "I heard plenty, an hour before you boys came to town. Gabe Rutter doesn't like the Baylor's any better than he does the Bennings."

Tex slowly slid one palm over the other. "Knife River," he said, "yo're fired, here an' now. My old man'll give you some advance pay. You got your sister to look out for. No use pertending, if Gabe Rutter starts poking around Lazy B, they's going to be smoke a-plenty."

"You kain't fire me, you goldang shorthorn!" Knife River flared.

He stalked out. Baylor followed him. He pretended not to hear when Anne called after him, "Tex! Tex, don't go looking for trouble."

THEY walked back up the dusty street. A wall-eyed deputy with a tobacco stained mustache was tacking up a notice of attachment on the door jamb of Benning's & Baylor's building.

He left before Tex and Knife River arrived. Amos Bennings said, "This ain't all of it. They're going to attach your dad's thoroughbred hosses, out at the Lazy B. Uhuh, of course it can't stick, but you never know what the law's going to do next, since Pratt bought it up."

Most of Sheriff Gabe Rutter's deputies were ex-cattle thieves, outlawed from the Texas Panhandle. Bennings concluded, "Son, you better hightail and warn your dad."

The Lazy B was some twenty miles southeast of Lincoln, not far from the Rio Felix. Sheltered by wooded hills, Baylor's blooded horses capered about the spacious corrals, or eyed the white faced cattle that roamed on the range.

Tex's father met the two riders. He sat his horse with a soldier's erectness, had, as a matter of fact, commanded a troop of cavalry during the Indian wars. His leathery face tightened as he listened. Finally he said, "Law is law, even if it's

in the hands of crooks."

"I ain't told you yet," Tex continued, "that he's going to attach your thoroughbreds."

"That's one thing he ain't doing." Captain Baylor's jaw tightened, making his white goatee bristle belligerently. "Pratt's working out a grudge against me and Bennings for staking honest homesteaders. We've never backed a squatter."

"Aiming to make gun medicine, dad?"

"There's other ways. If this country is ever to amount to a damn, folks have to start respecting the law. Even when it's wrong. I'll get those thoroughbreds off the ranch before those sidewinders get here," explained the old man. "To protect them. They're highstrung critters. Having them impounded whilst the court is stalling around is a mite too much."

"So mebbe we're making gun talk?" Tex's eyes gleamed.

"In self protection, yes," Captain Baylor said. "But defense doesn't stop at people. Hosses like these—" He affectionately patted the neck of his splendid mount, "air a leetle bit more human than a lot of folks around here, and I ain't letting them face abuse and neglect."

They rode on toward the newly built ranch house nestled among the cottonwoods fringing the creek that emptied into Rio Felix. Old man Baylor broke the silence by saying, "All nesters ain't skunks. And a lot of these hundred thousand acre spreads never were legally bought.

"Us old timers fought the Injuns. We flopped all over God's open country with our cow critters. But times are changing. We got to quit gun law and start using book law, if this territory's ever to amount to a hoot."

Old Frasco Robles left off spinning a horse hair mecate as the three rode up to the 'dobe ranch house. He lifted his high crowned hat and greeted, "*Buenas tardes, senores.*"

"*Que tal,* Frasco?"

Robles' daughter, Irina, came out of the little 'dobe which her father had occupied during the years since his health had taken him off the open range. Like the Spanish girls of Lincoln, she was shapely, with skin the color of old ivory; that transparent skin which is too perfect to face time's test. Her lustrous eyes took an added glow as she greeted Tex, and her voice had a languorous caress.

He liked her a lot, though not in the same way he cared for Anne Morell. To Irina, he was the *amo's* son; but that could not keep her heart from stepping up, just a bit, whenever he was near. And though Tex was too straightforward to trifle, he never came within arm's reach of Irina without wondering if some of the old timers hadn't been right in taking Mexican wives. . .

"Someone is riding hard," Irina said, gesturing. "*Por alla!*"

JEFF BAYLOR, who had dismounted, went into the house. In a moment he returned with a pair of binoculars. Lowering them, he spat disgustedly, and said, "Wearing stars. Loaded down with artillery, too."

"If that's what they want—"

But Tex cut in, "Keep yore shirt on, Knife River."

"They don't know who's here and who isn't," said his father. "Give me a hand with the thoroughbreds. Then you stay here to palaver whilst I take the hosses south."

Presently Jeff Baylor and old Frasco were in the saddle, each with four lead horses. Knife River was in charge of the remaining three; a good way to keep him out of trouble.

"Don't worry about me," said Tex. "Here's a passel of our boys, riding in from the range. They must've seen those jaspers coming along. Anyway, I ain't aiming to wrangle. If you say let 'em attach our stock, they kin do it."

In a moment, the thoroughbreds were beyond the cottonwoods, and approaching the banks of Rio Felix. When the cowpunchers rode up, Tex gave them a brief version of his father's orders. "Git to yore bunk house and corral work," he concluded. "Like nothing was happening."

Some of the hot-heads muttered, but they all respected the old man's orders. They dimly sensed that there was something higher than gun courage.

Tex laid aside his father's glasses and seated himself on a stump. Irina stood by him, close at his side. She was trembling. He looked up and saw that her eyes were wide and troubled.

"*Chiquita,* ain't no cause for getting scairt," he drawled. Then he gently edged her toward her father's 'dobe, saying, "You jest keep out of sight. Ever since Pratt bought himself a sheriff, a deputy's lower'n a rattlesnake."

She paused at the threshold, a hand on each of his arms. Tex said, "Honey, by now your pappy's a couple of miles from here. He ain't gittin' hurt."

Irina caught Tex quite off guard. Her arms twined about his neck. Tiptoed, she kissed him, and said, "I am afraid for you. They weel kill you. Your men are not gun slicks."

The deputies who pulled up near the corral were a hard bitten crew. Their hatchet faced leader seemed surprised, seeing Tex.

"Matter, Curly? I ain't biting people these days," young Baylor greeted. "Light and set, gents."

Curly Hinkle squinted right and left. "Whar's yore dad?"

"You kin talk business with me," Baylor suggested. "Hell of a note, you bringing a fightin' posse. Y'ain't afeard of being dry gulched, are you?"

"Button yore mouth, kid. I'm talkin' to yore old man. Whar is he?"

"So you brung Short Horn Roberts, Panhandle Grimes—" He named one by one, the posse members outlawed from Texas for cattle stealing. "To help you talk, huh?"

None of the pack would dare go for a gun. No one nor any two, for that matter, wanted to be the first to die. So they accepted the nomination. Curly said, "You fellows mosey around and find him."

"Got a warrant?" Tex drawled. "This is a civil proposition. If people was ever arrested for crimes in this territory—" He just grinned,

but that was as good as mentioning names.

"I got an attachment to levy."

"Then attach and bust yourself."

The posse headed for the corrals. But Curly in a moment demanded, "Whar's them race hosses? Them he keeps over yonder?"

"You seem purty well acquainted, for a stranger."

"He's done lit a shuck!" growled Sticky-Rope. "Lookit the sign!"

"Round up all the critters around, then," commanded Curly. "He kain't hide a dozen hosses thattaway. Not fer long."

One of the Lazy B men protested, "Hey, that there's mine. It ain't a Baylor hoss."

"Wait fer the jedge tuh talk. That's whut yuh git fer riding fer Baylor."

"Yuh kain't take my hoss," the Lazy B cowpoke snapped.

Tex felt it coming. Little chills trickled down his spine. Hammerhead Dobbs was pig stubborn, and quick on the trigger.

"Cut it out, Hammerhead!" Tex yelled, bounding forward. "I'm good fer a hoss—"

This was no time for shooting. A general melee would involve all the loyal cowpunchers. Hammerhead's gun was out. Tex took the harder course. Empty handed, he knocked the weapon aside. The blast deafened him, but the slug went wild.

He had moved so fast that the answering fire intended for Hammerhead raked him as they piled in a heap against the fence, and right in the midst of the posse.

Guns prodded him. Curly yelled to the Lazy B cowpokes, "Drap them irons, or I'll blast the wishbone outen yore boss. Hist 'em, you sons of—!"

Tex's hands were already in the air. He had deliberately passed up his chance to come up shooting. For a long, deadly instant, the issue wavered.

Had he wasted his only chance to fight?

Then his men shucked their guns. Suddenly, he felt relieved, and somewhat sick at the same time. Curly said, "Git a riata and tie this jasper."

Tex could not hear what the group behind him muttered. Curly, facing him, grinned and nodded. Too late, Tex sensed the move from the rear. A stick crackled. "You damn' skunk—"

But a blow smashed down, freezing the oath on his mouth. He collapsed. Dimly, he heard one say, "He allus did need a pistol whippin'. . ."

CHAPTER II

A Dead Man's Gun

IRINA was hacking at the rawhide that bound Tex's wrists and ankles. Dizzy and blinking, he sat up. "How long they been gone? How long I been out?"

"They leave fast," she said. "Someone notice the tracks. Where your father ride with the special horses."

He clambered to his feet. "One of them knew about that blooded stock. They'll trail dad. Run into the house and find me a gun. Maybe it ain't too late!"

The posse, eager to follow his father and the blooded horses, had not bothered to make a clean sweep of the cow ponies. That they had not killed Tex outright should have convinced him that the deputies had been restrained by a certain fear of public opinion, yet a grim foreboding gnawed at Tex Baylor.

"Never mind the guns!" he called. "I've found mine." Then, as Irina turned from the house: "Where the blazes are the cowpokes?"

"One of the posse made them ride over that way." She gestured to the west. "They have not the gun. So they mus' go, no?"

He began to get the picture: All the Lazy B men, covered by a deputy, had been herded away, probably to be set on foot, miles from nowhere. Then their ponies would be stampeded, thus keeping the dismounted riders from coming back to meddle.

Tex lost half an hour finding and roping a pair of mustangs. When he returned to the barn, he said, "You better go with me, just in case they come back to make a clean sweep of our stock. After they grab the old man."

Knowing his father's approximate course, Tex took a short cut.

The sun was setting when he saw a party of horsemen, far ahead. He reached for his glasses. After a moment he cursed, and his mouth tightened. "Good God—"

"*Que passa?*" Irina caught his arm. "Let me look."

"They got dad's hosses! I reckonized Susie Bell's white stockings. She's taller'n any cow pony—"

"But what else—? *Dios,* you look white—quick, tell me—"

"Dad ain't with 'em. Neither is Knife River, nor your dad."

Irina licked her lips. They had suddenly become gray. "You mean, they 'ave keel them all?"

"Mebbe it ain't that bad. You ride home. It's safe. They ain't going back. They're all there, and headin' away from the ranch. I'll take a look-see."

"I go with you."

Old Robles would not have turned back. Neither would his daughter. Tex could not argue with her. So they rode.

They found what they had feared: two dead mustangs, and a thoroughbred, sprawled and glassy eyed. Zopilotes circling overhead had guided Tex all too surely. There had been a fight. "They bushwhacked 'em," he growled, sizing up the ground. "The dirty —s!"

A hoarse cry made him wheel about. Knife River was crawling from behind a rock. His face was bloody; his shirt had ugly, dark red stains. "Got any water? My canteen got drilled," he croaked.

"Where's dad?" Baylor was on his feet. "Where's Robles?"

"Deader'n hell," he rasped, slumping back to his knees. "Bushwhacked us. Yore pappy and his hoss got it. Robles and me kicked loose from our bunged up critters. I come up shootin'. He couldn't, account his arm was kinked. Then suthin' hit me, an' when I clawed the fog outa my ears, pore old Robles was plumb gone."

He recognized Irina, and realized what he had blurted out. "Gee,

sister—I'm sorrier'n hell—but you'da learned it anyway—"

Irina was paper white. The deep inhalation of breath that seemed everlasting frozen made her breast statuesque against her calico dress. Silently, she took the canteen from Tex and knelt beside Knife River. "You take the drink, then I fix the head," she said quietly.

TEX turned to where his father had dragged himself to cover. An unfired gun was in his lean old hand. Bullets had peppered him between the shoulders, and from one side. Tex blinked, and cursed in a dry monotone. Then he took his father's cold .45 and thrust it into his hip pocket and stumbled over to Irina.

"Honey," he said, laying a hand on the girl's shoulder. She ceased tearing strips from her underskirt. "You stay here with this ornery Knife River. You got water and some jerky to chaw. Me, I'm making a little *pasear* for myself."

"Shucks, Tex," grumbled Knife River, "ain't yuh taking yore old man and her'n tuh town fer a bang-up funeral?"

Tex spat. "They'd turn over in their graves if they was hauled into a town as rotten as Lincoln. You're perking up already from havin' a nice lookin' gal fussin' over you."

Knife River looked foolish; and switched his glance from Irina's well turned knees. Tex went on, "You and her plant the two of them, right here. Heap rocks over 'em as high as you kin reach, so you kin see fer a mile away what the law does in Lincoln."

"Hey, whar yuh going?" demanded the bandaged cowpuncher as Baylor turned away.

"On some pussonal business. You got to stay out of sight. I got a free hand as long as no one knows you lived to tell about it."

"Go on and shake a hock, you ornery—!" said Knife River. "I'm commencing tuh understand."

But he did not, really. Irina's intuition brought her closer to the actual plan. She eyed him for a long moment, then pressed her lips lightly to his. "*Vaya con Dios!* Probably you will not come back, but if I were a man, I would ride with you."

The pent-up fury behind her smile whipped Baylor to further wrath; a rage so bitter that it cooled him. He swung into his saddle, and as he rode, he checked his guns, and his father's Colt. The carbine in the scabbard he had left with Irina and Knife River, just in case they needed the advantage of long range fire.

He sighed, half regretfully, thinking of Irina. "Fer a Spick, she's the sweetest critter there ever was. I got to take care of her," he mused, pausing to sweep the sun reddened horizon with his glasses. "Her dad died with mine. She ain't got nothing nor no one, now."

The governor of the territory, though notoriously a sympathizer of Conway Pratt, and hence just as openly opposed to Bennings & Baylor, could hardly tolerate this day's use of a star to back a personal feud. Baylor began thinking it out. He'd better consult his father's partner.

One man could not declare a pri-

vate war. Keeping Knife River under cover as a surprise witness might sink Conway Pratt and his lawless sheriff.

The posse had swung back to Lincoln. That was bad. It indicated how sure of himself Pratt was, else his tools would not dare bring Baylor's blooded horses right into the county seat.

Darkness prevented trailing, but Baylor, now assured of the destination of the posse, pressed on. Finally, he overtook a group of horsemen. By the rising moon, he identified them with reasonable certainty: their number checked, and so did the count of the lead horses.

From then on, Baylor took a short cut. It was late when he reached Lincoln, but the town was still whooping it up. Women laughed metallically above the scrape of feet and the squeal of fiddles. Drunks reeled down the street, and painted girls tapped at the shutters of their barred windows.

THE restaurant where Anne worked was closed. He was glad that he did not have to tell her at once that Knife River had been wounded. Inevitably, she'd blame him, Tex. Like so many of his kind, young Baylor was inclined to favor a girl he instinctively placed on a pedestal. In Irina's eyes he was right even when he was wrong.

He found Amos Bennings in his old Spanish house on the main street. The white haired banker listened to the grim story. "Son," he said, "these court proceedin's are nothing but a hook or crook way of blotting us out of a legiti-

He went on as though he hadn't heard her.

mate business. They can't keep your hosses. But they'll hound us from pillar to post. Wear us down. I'm dang surprised you weren't shot for resisting arrest or something."

"It looks like these outlaw deputies took things into their own hands," said Baylor. "Leaving me hogtied, so's they could say that if they'd planned to do any murdering, they'da started with me.

"You see, they didn't allow for Knife River escaping. And dad had enough other enemies."

"You're forgetting them hosses."

"Easy to claim they seen 'em running loose, and so roped them, account of the attachment on all our critters."

Bennings nodded. Only that wounded eye witness could upset the pat story the posse would tell.

Baylor went on, "You got some cash money handy? I'll need some. In case I have to sneak Knife River around about to palaver with the governor. Ain't no use trying anything here."

"I reckon," said Bennings. He reached for his hat, and automatically buckled on his guns. They left the spacious patio and strode down the street toward the banking and mercantile house. When they reached the darkened building, Bennings broke the sheriff's seals and unlocked the door.

"You can have all what's in the house," the old man said, opening the iron strong box. "This stuff's all in the custody of the court, but money is money, and I kin put it back when I draw some from Santa Fe."

Baylor pocketed the heavy poke of gold pieces. "I never did know what the hell this here law suit's about."

"Ain't no sense." Bennings closed the strong box and headed for the door. "Your dad and I had a mortgage on a nester's outfit and all his critters, naturally enough. Some of the steers stampeded and done a bit of damage to some Pratt property. Well, being as how we're in a legal way the *owners* of the nester's goods, they're suing us. A shyster lawyer's trick. Can't make it stick. But it'd pester hell out of us."

A voice from the left cut in, just as Baylor followed Bennings across the threshold. But for his respect for the older man, giving him precedence, he himself would have encountered Gabe Rutter, the sheroff. Several deputies were with him.

"Trespassin' on property in the custody of the court, huh?"

"Why, you gol danged skunk," gasped Bennings, resenting the implication that made him a thief and a sneak thief in his own house.

Steel flashed. Bennings went for his guns. The shadows were laced with fire. The old man reeled, but fired a shot. A deputy yelled, choked. And Baylor, blocked for a split second by his father's friend, went wild.

The rolling of his Colts was like a snare drum. He wove, sidestepped, in his fury ignoring the flame and lead that sought him. He felt the jerk of bullets, but only a square hit could stop him.

The shadows of the street apparently had given the watchers from the opposite doorway the idea that old man Bennings had been alone. Thus Baylor's blazing guns spread panic. Two men dropped, their feet beating a tattoo on the hard ground as they kicked their last.

The others fled, howling. Baylor halted, ice cold with wrath. Gabe

Rutter for an instant was silhouetted by the lights from a saloon from which no prudent man would for an instant venture.

Wham! Baylor's gun roared. Rutter pitched face forward, drilled squarely in the back. A shotgun raked the arcade with pellets. But the avenger was moving, shifting like the shadow of doom. Another blast. "Buckshot" Warren's smoking ten-gauge clattered to the hard earth, and the gunner slammed against a 'dobe wall, then crumpled.

Lincoln was a howling confusion. The sheriff's henchmen were rallying. Baylor, dashing toward his horse, heard men shout his name. Shots followed him as he leaped to the saddle. He had holstered his emptied guns.

Then he saw the cavalcade that was approaching: the posse that had his father's thoroughbreds. There was no chance of wheeling and running the gauntlet. The men behind him were under cover and ready for him now. He spurred his beast, raised his voice in a yell that for an instant rang like a bugle blast above the confusion.

He charged headlong, but empty handed. The horse guards had arrived just in time not to know exactly what was happening. Then Baylor remembered his father's pistol. He drew it, leaned across his horse's neck as he rode straight for the riders and the high strung thoroughbreds.

The stampede disorganized the posse. And a dead man's gun began emptying saddles.

Insane audacity carried Baylor through. He had a start, and he made the most of it. Minutes later, he slowed up and reloaded his guns.

"Shucks," he muttered, "looks like I ain't kilt after all." Then he grinned sourly. "Got money. Got a hoss. And I got to take care of Irina and Knife River . . . it's lynching fer us, from now on."

He had killed Conway Pratt's sheriff, and some of his deputies. The house of Bennings & Baylor was finished in New Mexico.

CHAPTER III

Reunion In El Paso

HELL roaring El Paso, sprawled on the Rio Grande, basked at the feet of peaks whose high heads now looked down on locomotive smoke. The railroad had come to town, and with it all the hardcases of the west; cut throats, gamblers, painted women and their business agents came from far and near to grow up with the new metropolis that was blossoming out of a sleepy Spanish town.

And the newest of these resorts was the Santa Fé Casino, where Tex Baylor watched his bankers made the cards whirr and hiss as they dealt them under the smoke filtered lamps.

Baylor's bid for vengeance had been delayed, during those months when he and Irina, carrying Knife River until his wounds healed, dodged those of Conway Pratt's gunslicks who dared wenture into the Panhandle. But here, in El Paso, the fugitives were safe from extradition and reprisal. Jeb Garvey, uncrowned king of that region, had taken a fancy to Baylor. And from Amos Bennings' fatal

pouch of gold pieces a casino had blossomed. That made Baylor one of the town's political clique, and pointed the way to strike at Pratt.

Neither Knife River nor Baylor had for a long time risked writing to Anne. That would have put her in danger, back in Lincoln. And when Tex finally ventured a letter, it was returned, unclaimed. Yet Irina, seeing the shadow behind Baylor's ready smile, knew that he had not abandoned hope of finding Knife River's golden haired sister.

Baylor wore a frock coat which hid his guns. Artificial light had taken the sun tan from his lean face. His boots were costly, and the white pleated shirt was fine. But his mind was not on the games. He was pondering on the gossip he had patiently assembled: Conway Pratt, dealing with cattle thieves, was soon to drive a herd from Ojinaga to New Mexico.

Wet cattle. Any man's booty. Baylor's eyes narowed at the thought of nailing the prize, exposing Pratt's skullduggery on Texan soil, where he was not king. Only one thing could be better: slapping leather with him, toe to toe. . . .

A tall man whose dyed hair and mustache failed to make him look young came stalking majestically down the aisle. He said, "Tex, this casino is doing right smart, but you don't like it none too well, do you?"

"Ain't what a man likes that makes him fat. What's on your mind, Jeb? Anything more about Pratt?"

"Yo're too consarn anxious, son," evaded Garvey. "Ticklish, giving you men fer a raid. An' I ain't any too sure I'd trust Rusty Hitchings. Mebbe if yuh got some sense and played up to that purty sister of his'n, you *might* get Rusty lined up trustworthy."

Baylor shook his head. Lovely Marcia Hitchings liked every man she saw, and there were few she didn't get a look at. Garvey poked him in the ribs with a ramrod forefinger and went on, "Too dang fussy. Now I tell you what. I got a good job for a feller who can stand on his own feet and fan a gun. Me, I can't watch everything, with so many interests in El Paso."

That was no wonder; saloons, dance halls, gambling houses, and politics would take his time. These activities would keep him from giving much attention to the range. Jeb's position in town made his protection valuable. Nothing less than a Texas Ranger could touch a friend of Jeb's. Lawmen from other states entered at their own risk.

"If it's a good job," said Baylor, "I'm all for it."

"I knowed you would be, Tex. Supposing you come over to my office. I just moved to the Red Mill. There's a couple of gents I want you to meet."

"As soon as I can," said Tex.

Garvey had scarcely left when Knife River entered from a side door. He wore store clothes. The freckled cowpuncher was now a deputy to help maintain order in the Santa Fé Casino. "Is they any chanct of me getting the evening off? And how about some money? I'm sort of short."

"Who's the girl?"

"Yuh'd be surprised," grinned

Knife River. "C'mon out and say hello."

A glittering carriage was waiting in the dark alley. Tex whistled softly. "What in tunket you found fer yourself now?"

A slim white arm reached from the window. Silk rustled, and a gust of heady sweetness billowed from inside. Then, as Baylor's eyes became accustomed to the half gloom, he distinguished the lady's bare shoulders, her white throat and the swell of her breast; but it was the voice that awoke recollection.

"Why—I'll be double danged!" he exclaimed, recognizing the lovely face that the momentary glow of his cigarette revealed. "Maureen Hayes!"

THIS was the red headed dance hall girl from Lincoln. She caught his hand, said said, "Maureen, all right. Come in, Tex. I want to talk to you."

"Uh—hey, you!" But Knife River was heading for the casino door.

Maureen said, "I persuaded him to play a trick. To get you out."

"You oughta be shot," he said, joining her. "He used to be crazy about you. And now you make an errand boy out of him."

"He's kind of nice," she admitted, "but not like you. Imagine my surprise, hearing you were in El Paso."

"That's mutual." Baylor was still puzzled. "But I never saw you in the casino."

"Of course not. I said, I heard of you." She snuggled closer. The rustle of silk thrilled him. "Tex, darling. You haven't kissed me."

So he did. He liked the taste of her rouge, the warmth of her supple young form pressed to his. Her upturned face was glorified by the glow in her misting eyes. They were both breathing faster when he repeated, "How come you're here, Maureen."

"When I heard about the railroad, I pulled out of Lincoln. Fact is, I married Jeb Garvey."

"What?"

"Yes. He told me about you. It made me home sick—Tex, dear—now that we've met again—"

Her voice was a caressing promise and an invitation. She did not need words to tell him what she meant: now that she was a lady, they could meet. That Anne Morell was something far off, unreal.

He shook his head. "Kain't do it, honey. Jeb gave me a fresh start. You're his wife now. An' it wasn't that I was ever high nosed, Maureen—you know that—"

"Not high nosed. . . ." Very slowly, nodding as understanding entered. "No, I reckon not, Tex. Thinking back, I guess I was silly. Just that I don't love Jeb, even if he is good to me."

"I got business to attend to, Maureen," he cut in. "And listen, you got a fresh start, too. Don't make a mess of it. You're purty important in Paso del Norte, being Jeb's wife."

"Maybe I am," Then, impulsively, "Kiss me and forget I ever saw you, Tex."

The first was easier than the last . . . his blood raced as he wiped her rouge from his lips. And walking down the street, he felt foolish about her perfume. It clung to him,

tingled his nostrils.

Paso del Norte, booming, lusty, boisterous in its newly found importance, seemed to draw everything. Maureen's rise from a dance hall to mistress of Jeb Garvey's mansion was typical of the town.

"And me, I'm rising in this sink," Baylor sombrely reflected as he headed toward the Red Mill. "Wonder dad ain't kicked the stones offen his chest!"

A SIX foot man with flowing, tawny hair stalked down the street. He wore Colts in his leather lined hip pockets, and had a sawed off shotgun cradled in his arm. This was Dallas Hardin, the marshal. His craggy face relaxed when he saw Baylor. "Evening, Tex."

"Evening, Dallas. Cut anyone off tonight?"

"Tolable quiet tonight," he solemnly answered. "Only two shootings."

Baylor stepped into the smoke and din of the Red Mill, a new place modeled after a Mexican *cantina* of the better sort. No one cared what the girls did after working hours, but while on duty, they were restricted to dancing, and taking tea out of whiskey glasses —one dollar a throw, and the cowpunchers who optimistically gargled the pure quill wondered why they never succeeded in out-drinking their lovely companions!

A knot of salty jaspers leaned against the bar, tossing cockle-burrs at the elaborate coiffures of the dancing girls. Rusty Hitchings, a buck-toothed fellow with a chronic grin, dug a horn-toad out of his pocket. He edged along the wall, and stopped at one of the booths at the further side of the floor. His companions followed, ready for a high laugh.

Baylor had heard plenty of Hitchings, the saddle tramp who had made good in a small way, though he had seen more of Rusty's lovely sister than the plug ugly of the family.

The girl in the booth had her back turned, so the low partition masked all but her lovely pale-gold hair. But Baylor knew that like her sisters, she would be wearing a gown very low in the back, daringly cut to a deep vee; a prime lot, these girls of the Red Mill, whose slashed skirts temptingly outlined sleek limbs, gave dazzling glimpses of silk clad knees.

It wasn't any of his business. The girls were expected to stand a reasonable amount of horseplay. But he instinctively disliked Rusty Hitchings and his perpetual grin. Baylor cut across the floor, weaving in and out among the dancers.

A woman screamed. A chair scraped, and boisterous laughter drowned her outcry as she tried to find enough slack in her gown so that the horn toad could drop through. But the dress was too tight, and the boys howled.

"I'll git it, m'am!" Rusty pawed the back of the dress. "Shore wish I was a horn toad! The view must be scrumptious."

Her companion was enjoying it, heartily. Between his probing and Rusty's, the tormented blonde was fit to be tied. A shoulder strap yielded, and her gown slipped its moorings.

But neither the horn toad nor

the whooping merry makers had time to enjoy the display. The girl was Anne Morell. In her embarrassment, she did not recognize Baylor; not until his fist lifted Rusty off his feet.

"Git outen here," flared Rusty's pal. "Yuh tin horn gambler, yuh—"

He made the mistake of slapping leather. Anne cried, "Tex—watch—"

She flung herself against the gunner. The shot went wild. Baylor, holding his fire because of her intervention, was untouched. But his hesitation was misconstrued. The salty jasper tried again, but the hammer never fell. Baylor's Colt blazed. The fellow crumpled, plugged between the eyes.

The dance hall girls were scattering like quail. Hitchings' allies charged from the bar. "Get down!" Baylor's outflung arm swept Anne into a corner. He flung himself into the opposite direction, and yelled, "Drop them irons or I come out a-shootin'!"

Colt in each hand, he held his fire. Screaming women still blocked the field. And then Dallas Hardin came in from the street, shotgun leveled.

That quieted things. Anne emerged from cover, wide eyed. The sudden meeting left them both tongue tied. After a moment, Tex said, "Honey, I been wondering for months where you went. I done wrote you."

"Tex," she sobbed, when her first gasp of breath gave her speech, "I'd given you and Knife River up for dead. I got out of that awful town—" She reddened, and the flush crept to her bosom. "This is about all I could find to do, in El Paso." Then, stepping back to eye him from head to foot: "Lord, Tex! you, gambling?"

"All I could find to do, honey," he grimly said. "Your brother's with me, all okay. Now git your hair fixed up, whilst I talk to the marshal."

Rusty Hitchings rose to his knees, muttering. He made a sudden lunge for his belt. The marshal booted the gun into the corner. "Git outen here, Rusty. Yo're dawg gone lucky y'ain't as full of lead as yore no-good pardner."

Hitchings left, cursing. Baylor said, "Dallas, I got some business with Jeb Garvey upstairs. If you want me for smoking this tramp's bacon, you know where you can find me."

Dallas Hardin grinned. "Ef yuh ain't pig-dumb, it'll be with Anne. Sounds like you usta know her?"

Baylor nodded. "I did."

"Shore fine, Tex," said the marshal. "She needs a decent feller tuh look after her."

CHAPTER IV

Tex Considers a Proposition

A SQUARE faced man with eyes cold as gimlets had his spurs planted on Garvey's desk. "Evening, Lafe," Baylor greeted.

Lafe Singer was a hard case, but cool and business-like. He preferred the safety of a long range rifle and sheltering rocks. And what he knew about altering brands would fill a book.

"Tex," Garvey began, "Lafe and me is faced with a problem.

Around Sierra Blanca, where we been sort of aiming to expand our holdings."

"They's too dang many nesters pushing in," Singer complained. "Fencing off water holes. Bringing lawsuits account of our critters busting in through their cracker-box fences they ain't got no right to put up in the first place."

Baylor asked, "How do I come in."

"Yo're *purty* handy slapping leather."

"Fer fun, not fer money," Baylor explained. "I ain't hiring out as a gun slick."

"Now, listen. Yuh'll be a depitty, representing law."

"Deputy?" Tex flared. "You land grabbing buzzards! I wouldn't wear a star to save my damn' neck. Not after what happened to my old man."

"Yore old man," Singer cut in, nimbly hopping to his feet, "was agin the best interests of the cattle business."

"Now, Lafe," Garvey interposed.

"Banking fer a bunch of sod busting land thieves and penny ante rustlers! Encouraging them—'

Singer was considerably older than Baylor, but his gray sprinkled hair did not count at the moment. Tex said, "You damn dirty—! My old man never backed the thieves like you!" His fist licked out.

Singer crashed against the wall, tangled his spurs with a waste basket, and thumped to the floor. Even as he fell, dazed and groggy, his leathery hand snaked to his belt.

But Baylor crouched. "Watch it, Singer!" he growled. "Don't yuh pull a gun!"

"Quit it, the two of you!"

Jeb Garvey shook his sleeves. A derringer blossomed in each hand. "Easy, gents, or I'll drill the both of you."

For a moment, Singer and Baylor glared at each other. Then the former said, "Young feller, seeing as how yo're a friend of Jeb's, an' mebbe yo'll get some sense, I'm willing to forget this. Business fust."

"Lafe," said Garvey, "you two shake hands, and fergit this yere foolishness. Mutual apologies, only neither of yuh has tuh say it in so many words. I'll talk to Tex myself."

"Good by me," said Baylor. "Only, I ain't hiring out."

Their hands met. Tex was not certain that he had made another enemy. Singer was too business-like to be human. When the door closed behind him, Garvey began, "Tex, you listen to reason. You ain't got any call to be so finnicky, not after laying awake nights, figgering how to cut Pratt's trail herd."

"That's a feud," protested Baylor.

"Sure, sure, I understand that. Now, this depitty business. Ain't any sense grabbing Pratt's critters and then getting nailed with 'em, say, on the road to Kansas. But if you help us get the squatters outen that Sierra Blanca district, we'd have a place to hide the cows until their new brands look natural. Then we get some real good lookin' bill of sales, huh?"

"I ain't going into this for money, exactly," Baylor corrected. "To

The Colt blazed and the fellow crumpled.

make a monkey out of Pratt, sure. To catch him with dirty hands, sure. But perfessional rustling, that ain't my meat. I won't play, particular not when I got to gun out a bunch of sod busters and the like that's got a lawful title to their land."

"Me and Lafe need a reliable feller to work for us. Shucks, I depended on you."

"Jeb, you been mighty decent to me. If it hadn't been for you, I'd be owl hooting, I guess. Or I'd be extradited to New Mexico. Pratt's powerful sore about me smoking Gabe Rutter's bacon. But this deal's too much.

"Minute you get messed up with Singer, all the way to the hilt, your pull in town kain't save you. Yeah, I know I'm a young squirt to talk to you this way, but you know I'm right. Singer's poison. He's asking you and me to do his dirt. You and me'll grab the dirty end of the stick.

"You're out of date, Jeb. Times is changing.My old man died backing the new order. But you can't stop nesters and sod busters. No one can."

"Quit yore dang preaching, Tex," growled Garvey; but he was worried. This was the first time anyone had put it in that light. "Mebbe they is suthin' in what yuh say. Ain't you talking, it's your old man. When I see Lafe, I'll tell him it's no go."

"You mean that?"

"I allow I do, Tex."

"Shake on it, Jeb."

HE went down to the main floor. There he found Anne. Luckily, she was not engaged. He seated himself at her table, ordered drinks, and said, "Honey, I broke away, figuring I'd have good news for you when I came down. But I ain't."

He told her of the interview. Anne listened, her lovely face becoming a bit more grave every moment. Finally, she said, "Tex, I gather you've done well for yourself here in Paso del Norte. Now, why don't you quit."

"I can't," he protested. "Until I sink Conway Pratt."

"You can. Even if you haven't such a rich stake in cash money. Gambling is to trim suckers, whether you do it honestly, or whether you cold deck them. Why don't you sell out and get a small spread? Or ride for some honest rancher? Anything decent. Instead of making a gambling house tramp of yourself and my brother."

That seemed unjust. He flared, "Look-ee here, Anne! I guess *you* ain't trimming suckers, honeying them and dancing with them and having them buy yuh drinks. Yo're worse'n I am. I use honest cards. A man gets a run fer his money with me. But not with you!"

"Why—" she reddened. That unfair jibe had just enough truth in it to leave her wrathful and breathless. "Tex Baylor, if you ever dare speak to me again!"

Her glass of cold tea had splashed him full in the eyes. When he blinked them clear, he caught just a flash of Anne's flame colored skirt, a twinkle of her silken legs as she whisked through a doorway leading to the rear.

He went back to the casino, pondering on the unreasonableness

of women. He wanted to talk to Anne's brother. Knife River was not on duty. Baylor sent a messenger after a substitute guard. Then, still dazed by the swiftness of the evening's encounters, Tex mounted up and slowly rode to his quarters on the outskirts of town.

"Mebbe Anne's right," he pondered. "The house has the odds to clean suckers, even if the cards are honest."

Finding Anne had changed things. Only the memory of the two men who lay under that heap of rock near the Rio Felix in forbidden New Mexico kept him from abandoning his plan to strike at Conway Pratt, king of the Pecos. It took more than personal skill; fighting demanded hired gunners, and the casino would furnish the money.

A WEEK passed. Knife River said to Baylor, "I don't figure Sis is as hostile as she claims she is, though she ain't saying nothing but what a low business yo're in."

"Why in hell don't you try to talk her outa that dance hall?" Baylor countered.

Knife River snorted. "I tried tuh give her some of my own money, but she suspected it of being yours. That gal's pig stubborn. She ain't quitting the Red Mill until you shake a hock outa El Paso and make a honest living."

Baylor's face lengthened. He was more than homesick for the open range, the bawling and rumble of a herd on the march. The smell of burnt hair and hide, the whip of rain in his face—that was living. This night hawk existence wasn't.

"Run along tuh work," he growled. "I ain't showing up tonight. I got some thinking tuh do."

"Mebbe," grinned Knife River over his shoulder, "I better call Doc Anson tuh give yuh a anaesthetic—"

"Git out, yuh pinto-faced sculpin!"

Knife River got. Baylor peeled off his frock coat and flung it into a corner. He removed his pleated shirt and kicked it after the coat. Out of a closet he dug some stained boots, some faded levis; he donned them, and his old gun belt. His feet now felt better, with the heels weighted down by spurs.

"With a bit of hoss-hair on me, I might dang neart smell like a man onct more," he sourly muttered, planting his feet on the table.

A TAPPING at the door aroused him. In the moonlight, he could only see that the girl was blonde, and that her face must be lovely.

During a moment of hope inspired illusion, he thought it was Anne, but a second look, and a whiff of her sense-stirring perfume corrected that. "Good evenin', Miss Marcia. I appreciate this honor more'n I can understand it, right off hand," he greeted.

"Of course you'd not guess, Mr. Baylor," she cooed, extending a soft little hand whose caressing contact thrilled Tex.

He touched a match to the kerosene lamp, but it spluttered for a moment on a dry wick and went out. "Never mind," she said, then added. "I'm terribly sorry you and my brother had difficulties."

She slid gracefully into a moon drenched chair.

Marcia Hitching's wore embroidered riding boots, and a divided skirt, but despite all that, she contrived to let him know that she had shapely legs. Above the waist, her costume did not handicap her a great deal.

The clinging transparency of her silk blouse inclined Baylor to the reasoning that only the Chinese blamed every member of the family for the faults one. Marcia was just short of plumpness, but so beautifully curved that she seemed slender rather than mature. And no doubt that she had nice eyes; deep blue, he remembered, behind dark lashes that were striking in contrast with her naturally silver-blonde hair.

"Rusty," she said, "was just drunk and playful the other night. Now, you boys have friends in common."

"M'am, I ain't so sure of that," he bluntly declared.

"Oh, yes you have," Marcia sweetly persisted. "There's me, for instance. And Lafe Singer."

"If your brother is jest kiddish and playful, you better tell him to get hisself straightened out."

"Now, Mr. Baylor, let's not quarrel. You're so hot headed and stubborn."

Marcia's wheedling voice and the way her red lips shaped as though on the verge of a kiss combined to make him a bit more tolerant.

"All right, we ain't quarreling."

"Lafe asked you and Jeb Garvey to reconsider his proposition the other night," she cut in. "Oh, I know all about it, Tex. You don't mind if I call you Tex, do you?"

He didn't, and she went on, "You'll listen to me, just a tiny bit, won't you?"

"All right. Mebbe I was hasty."

"Everything Rusty and I have in the world since dad died is our little spread beyond Ysleta. We're having all kinds of trouble with a gang of—"

"Nesters, I reckon?"

"Now, Tex—" She hitched her chair closer. He could see the pale skin that gleamed above the transparent top of her blouse. The sweetness she exuded stirred his blood. "I know how you feel about nesters. But you know as well as I do that lots of them are hard cases. I don't mean the kind your father backed. I mean sure enough squatters, dry gulching cattlemen who try to keep their herds from being run away."

Marcia was giving the other side of it. In parts of Texas there were nesters, settling where they pleased, and building up herds by brand blotting.

"That's what Rusty and I have to contend with. Now, if you team up with Lafe and Jeb, you'll be a force favoring law and order. I know you'll like that better than working in town."

She knew why he had donned his levis and old boots, and shed his gambler's dress.

He was suspicious of Marcia, yet, there could be truth in what she said. He said, "I might take a *pasear* out that way and look around a bit. Then decide."

Marcia rippled to her feet and stood beside him, very close and fragrant. "Can I count on that?"

"You kain't count on nothing, till you've got it."

Marcia caught him by the vest. She pressed against him. "Please," she breathed. "You won't be sorry."

Her lips were half parted. One arm crept about his neck, and she tiptoed to bring her upturned face temptingly close. He could not ever quite remember just what had done it, but suddenly, he was kissing her. And he liked it.

She broke away for breath, finally. In the tense silence that followed, she tremulously said, "Let's talk this over, Tex."

The cold brilliance of the moonlight filtering in through the barred Mexican window made Marcia's beauty ethereal to the eye. Only his encircling arm told him that she was alluringly curved. "You're wondering why I'm so . . . forward. I don't care! I've heard a lot about you. Rusty didn't send me at all. I came on my own account."

Anything seemed probable in that flattering light which made her throat seem modeled in ivory, and her disheveled hair a saint's halo. . . .

CHAPTER V

Time for a Showdown

BUT Marcia had overplayed her hand. Baylor snapped the spell: "Too much rope for one steer, Marcia. I ain't important enough. Seems sorta queer, you hearing so much about me, when a gal from my own home town didn't know I was in El Paso till jest the other night."

Marcia sat upright. "You mean that dance hall bum that made you shoot Rusty's pardner?"

He leaped to his feet, eyes ablaze. From a woman, he had to take it.

Marcia said, "You're foolish. Blind foolish. Anne Morell—well, I was hasty, I guess. But she's influenced you against your best interests. News travels fast here."

Marcia patted her hair into shape, and went toward the door. Tex stood at the window, watching her mount the *palomino* at the hitching post. Then he turned away, thoughtfully, refilled the kerosene lamp and lit it.

Later, he saddled his horse and rode into town. He stopped at the Red Mill, determined to see Anne Morell. Despite her porcupine attitude, he'd force things to a showdown. This was no way to treat a fellow after all these months of separation. Probably she blamed him for Knife River's job as bouncer in a gambling house; blamed him for her brother's wounds in the service of the Lazy B, and his flight from New Mexico, an outlaw's companion.

Time for a showdown.

Anne, weary-eyed yet lovely at her table, did not try to avoid him. She smiled, and said, "I'm tired, Tex. Thank God, I don't have to pretend to be sprightly and witty and—"

"Honey," he grinned, happy at the start, "I was afeared you'd bite my head off."

She caught his arm, leaned closer. "We can quarrel later, Tex." He wondered at the tension of her voice. "I overheard plenty. You've got to get out of El Paso. Garvey's making the town so rotten with imported gamblers and women and gun slicks that the Rangers are on the way to clean up. To nail all

professional gun fighters. Hold and extradite those wanted in other states."

"What?" That hit him between the eyes. He was wanted in New Mexico! "Where you git this, Anne?"

"Associating with Jeb Garvey will get you caught in the wave of reform that's bound to sweep this town. It's rotten ripe, a scandal to all Texas."

"Can you quit this place now?" he countered.

"For keeps, Tex," she answered. "Knife River told me things. If you're willing to leave town, I'll go with you. Anywhere."

"You mean," he incredulously groped, "you'll marry me? A half way outlaw with no prospects?"

"Yes. If you'll quit your wild plans for revenge," she said. "Now wait till I get my wrap. I told Garvey I was through tonight. A couple hours don't count."

This was something to draw to. The corrupt regime in New Mexico couldn't last long. When the time was ripe, he'd go back, stand trial, and beat the unjust case. If he could not redeem his father's lands, why then he'd just have to start out from scratch.

Jeb Garvey stalked into the Red Mill. He was in a hurry, but he paused to inquire, "Changed your mind, Tex?"

"I'm selling the casino. I'm plumb through."

His voice was low, but it bit like his eyes. Jeb Garvey wavered.

"Son," he finally said, "mebbe yo're right."

Baylor nodded, turned on his heel, and headed for the side entrance. Anne was already there, waiting.

HER cape was apricot colored. The light from the hall picked silver glints from her tiny slippers, and a warm glow from her wavy hair. Tex stretched long legs to join her. She took his arm, and for a moment the possessive contact of her hand told him that the world was right again.

Then that uncanny premonition of danger which gives one man a split second advantage that saves his life, while the lack of intuition sends another to his doom, made Baylor jerk his arm clear of Anne's grasp. It might have been the stirring in the alley; it might have been the wind blown scent of of rank, Mexican tobacco. He lashed out, flattening her in a tangle of cape and skirts and silken legs. "Watch it!" he yelled, hurling himself away.

The warning was swallowed in a deafening roar. Buckshot whistled from the sheet of flame that poured out of the shadows. Cat quick, he had gotten himself clear by a hair. The closeness of the range kept the deadly charge from scattering enough to riddle either target.

The bedlam of voices from inside the dance hall was punctuated by the thunder of Baylor's gun. The man who had risen from behind the rainwater barrel dropped, chest riddled with slugs.

Old Dallas Hardin came a-pounding, artillery unlimbered. Baylor promptly raised his hands. Someone brought a lantern. Two cowpunchers pawed Anne to her feet, with more good heartedness than skill. She was too dazed to

think of getting her skirts down about her knees.

"No, I'm not hurt," she cried. "Oh, Tex—are you all right—?"

"Fitter'n a fiddle, m'am," boomed Dallas, squinting at her pale face.

"Who is the skunk?" growled Baylor, picking up the weapon he had wisely discarded at the quick-triggered marshal's approach.

"Reckless critter, trying tuh pull down on you. Look-ee there, Tex. Side door of that vacant buildin' open fer his triumphant retreat." Hardin knelt beside the dying man and demanded. "Who put yuh on this job?"

"I ain't telling," croaked the gunner, defiantly.

"Y'ain't?" Hardin glared. "Listen, bub: I'll stomp yore guts out insteada callin' a doctor. Who sent yuh?"

"Hell— of I told yuh—he'd—"

"Yore done shot tuh hell," Hardin growled. "Yuh got jest one chanct tuh die easy."

The hard boiled marshal scored. "Lafe," the dry gulcher coughed. "Told me—" That was all; but it was enough for Baylor.

"That don't make much sense," frowned Hardin. "Didn't say whut Lafe told him. You an' Singer been quarrelin'?"

Baylor knew that those three words would be worthless in court. Moreover, he had no intention of letting the law into his personal affairs. So he said, "Dallas, this jasper smells more of whiskey than blood. I don't reckon he knew what he was talkin' about or cared, jest so long as you didn't tromp on him."

Hardin's nostrils crinkled. "He musta been loaded with red-eye to git enough guts fer sech a job. Bub, yuh run along now. Though that gal must be a mite tetched tuh go any where with you, after she nearly got her purty head shot off fer being near you."

AS BAYLOR and Anne left, she said, "Tex, this just proves what I was telling you. I'm half convinced that New Mexico was doing some informal extradition work. Gabe Rutter had a lot of surviving friends."

She had not heard the dying man's last words.

"Honey," retorted Baylor, "if you ask me, that shotgun had your address on it. To keep you from influencing me. Now let's go home, where we can talk."

"Tex," said Anne, as they approached her hotel, "I guess I was silly, flaring up the way I did. That very night, thinking things over, I began making up my mind to move in and keep house for you and brother.

"Maybe I'd better, anyway. It'll take you a while getting ready to close out your business in El Paso."

Baylor shook his head. "Mighty sweet of you, but it'd be dangerous. We're on the outside of town, and if Conway Pratt's really bent on making a private example of me, that shack is bound to be dangerous."

"I'd be safer there than in this hotel," she protested.

"Honey, nothing I'd love better than having you in the house, with that jugheaded Knife River as a sort of chaperon. But if that

charge of buckshot was fer you, they won't be any more."

"Why not?" she frowned, perplexed at his logic.

'Because anything you were going to tell me, you done told it, by now. Ain't no more use killing you. El Paso may be hard boiled and poisonous, but shooting women ain't its natural procedure by a long day's march. You better stay here, honey.

"And I'll be looking and listenin'. I'm half way sorry fer Jeb. Pore devil, on top of it all, he married—"

"I recognized her. That redhead from the Lincoln dancehall. The one that used to make eyes at you."

Baylor looked confused. "How'd you know? I never told you."

"Brother told me all about her! The young idiot was kind of sweet on her himself." She made a wry grimace and added, "And to think, I told him she was just a dance hall girl, and he oughtn't to take her seriously. Times have changed!"

"Better days comin," he countered. "And until I can take care of you, Knife River can do that."

CHAPTER VI

Remembering Irina

BAYLOR stopped at the casino, mainly to see Knife River, and tell him of the reconciliation with Anne. But the towheaded cowpuncher was not there. Moreover, none of the dealers had seen him. One said, "Fierro, his regular substitute, showed up for him."

Funny . . . he hadn't said a thing about an evening off. And irresponsible as Knife River seemed, he usually attended to business. Baylor was vaguely worried. This absence took the edge from his newly found exuberance.

His next stop was the Red Mill. Music blared; glass tinkled, and the laughter of women was shrill above the scrape of boots. There was a momentary hush when Baylor strode toward the stairs. Men muttered, "Lookin' square intuh a scattergun, drawed jest like that, and got his man! Gawd, it's shore a wonder he left any lawmen alive in Lincoln. . . ."

Baylor began to understand why Hitchings and Lafe Singer were so anxious to engage him: he had become a legend, something fabulous.

He found Garvey in his office. The muttered "C'min" in response to his knock prepared Baylor. He was not surprised to see the king of El Paso sitting there, staring at the cuspidor, and abstractedly whittling at a plug of tobacco. Jeb would raise hell, Baylor reckoned, so he blurted it out; get it over with, and no beating about the bush.

"Jeb, I'm rattling my hocks. You name your own figure, and the casino is yourn."

Garvey still stared at the brass cuspidor.

"Jeb, you hear me? Your own price."

"I heard you." He looked up, eyes haggard. His face had an expression Baylor had never seen before. It was not fear or worry; it was suspicion. "What's yore

hurry. You afeard I'm gittin' riled up about Maureen?"

So that was it! What snake in the grass had seen and blabbed about that hail and farewell in Maureen Garvey's carriage, that night? Baylor ignored the pointed query by saying, "Anne Morell and me are getting a fresh start. You been mighty good to me, Jeb, but it's getting under my skin, setting here and knowing that if it warn't for you, they'd be a herd of deppities from New Mexico combing the town for me.

"So I'm lighting a shuck, and to hell with raiding Pratt, and the same for making quick money. My old man never found it on bushes, and town money don't taste right."

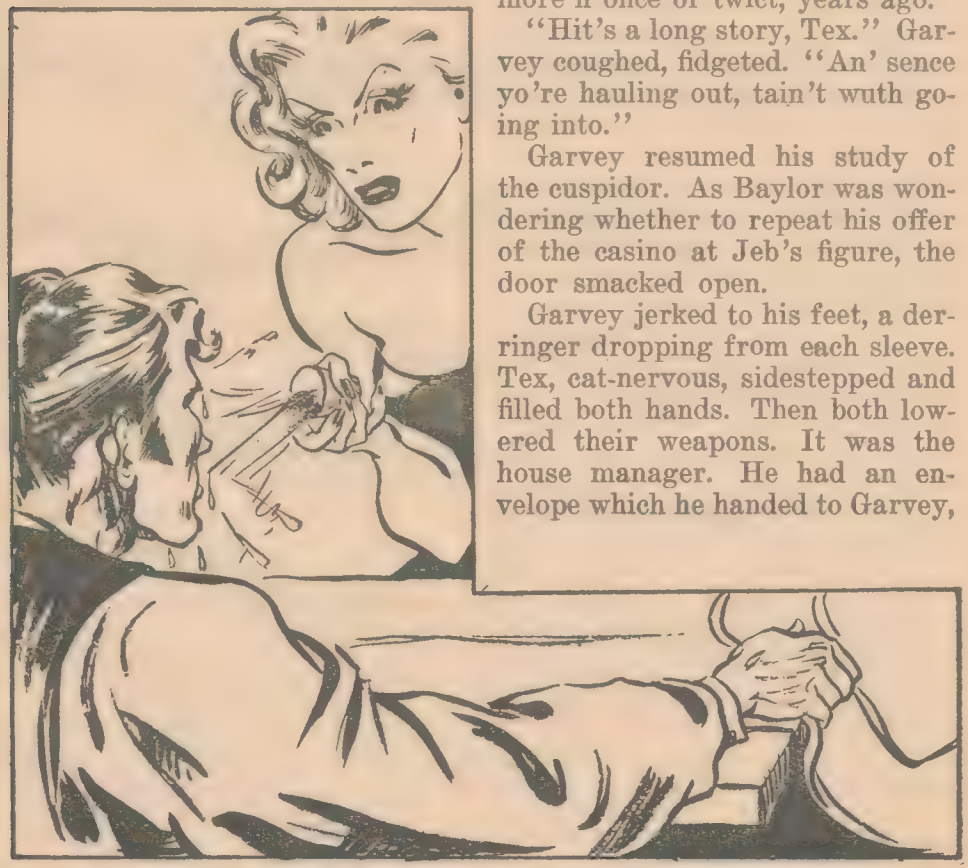
"So?" Jeb's yellow teeth closed on his cut of tobacco. He didn't seem quite to know what to think or say. Baylor's straightforward speech and deliberate ignoring of the reference to butterfly Maureen seemed to have taken him aback. "Well, I'm shore disappointed, Tex. I'd counted right smart on kicking Pratt whar it'd hurt the most—right in the bankroll."

"Jeb, you never told me exactly why you was hostile to Pratt," Baylor reminded him. "It sure ain't on my account nor my dad's, seeing as how you never met him more'n once or twict, years ago."

"Hit's a long story, Tex." Garvey coughed, fidgeted. "An' sence yo're hauling out, tain't wuth going into."

Garvey resumed his study of the cuspidor. As Baylor was wondering whether to repeat his offer of the casino at Jeb's figure, the door smacked open.

Garvey jerked to his feet, a derringer dropping from each sleeve. Tex, cat-nervous, sidestepped and filled both hands. Then both lowered their weapons. It was the house manager. He had an envelope which he handed to Garvey,



Her glass of cold tea splashed him full in the eye.

saying, "Feller came in all in a lather, give to me and said you oughta see it *pronto*. And he dusted out afore I could say Jack Robinson. Must be dang impo'tant."

"Thanks, Allen." Garvey abstractedly opened the note. One glance, and he jerked bolt up, cursed in a low dazed tone. The paper dropped from his fingers. "The dirty polecats!"

The color had left Garvey's face. Baylor did not have to pick up the paper. His eyes were keen, and the script was clear, too clear for anything but disguised handwriting. The words blazed up at him: *"Garvey: You're playing. To make sure you will, we've got your wife where she'll be safe until this box is dealt out. Get stubborn, and you won't see her any more."*

THERE was no signature, but none was needed. Lafe Singer and his crowd had put on extra pressure. Probably they had feared that exposing Garvey would kick back at them; to say nothing of ending his usefulness.

He picked up the paper and handed it to Baylor, who said, "I done read enough, Jeb."

He headed for the door. Garvey demanded, "Where you going?"

"On the prod. You sit tight. Don't tell anyone I know. Singer ain't forcing us into his crowd. Not if I kin get Maureen clear. He won't dare hurt her. Not right away, nohow."

"Got any ideas on where she is?"

An odd light gleamed in Baylor's eyes. "No. But there's ways of finding out."

He piled into the saddle and loped down the main drag. As he rode, he cursed Knife River's high hearted kiddishness. The brat! Right when he needed an ally, someone he could talk to and trust. To tell Anne of this reverse would be the last word; she'd never understand his sudden decision not to break with Jeb Garvey at once. Womanlike, she would insist that Maureen's captors would find her quite too amiable to kill.

Baylor had one friend who would neither doubt nor question: Irina Robles, whom he had deliberately avoided, lest her sweet loveliness and the memory of the perils they had shared in escaping from New Mexico slip under his guard, and crowd Anne hopelessly out of the picture. He would not trifle with Irina, so there had been no other way.

Ever since Baylor's establishing himself in El Paso, she had been living with a Mexican family, upstream from the town, and not far from the Rio Grande. The sodbuster's spread, as Knife River called it, was more than it seemed. Anticipating the perils of political protection, Baylor had provided for a taking off point.

There were horses, arms, food cached at the little farm; and likewise an emergency war chest, in case Baylor had to leave in a hurry. If Jeb Garvey died—and men died suddenly in Paso del Norte!—the town would be too hot for a fugitive from New Mexico. The same applied if the impending clash with Conway Pratt went wrong. And now, Irina could help him in an unexpected way.

The Mexicans, both in El Paso

and in Juarez, just across the Rio Grande, missed little. They knew, as no one else could, what the American renegades across the border were doing. Mexican clannishness made them keep this knowledge to themselves. But Irina would be an exception.

It was unlikely that Maureen's captor would keep her on the Texas side. She must be in some village south of the border.

Baylor rode northwest, following the cottonwoods that dotted the fertile land near the Rio Grande. He dismounted at a neatly whitewashed 'dobe, and beat the door with the butt of his .45.

OLD Tío Pepe, the nominal owner of the farm, cautiously answered the summons, giving warning that his gun was ready and waiting.

"*Buenos noches,*" said Baylor. "I am mortified to make this disturbance. But it is urgent. You will pardon me, I hope?"

"Ah—Señor Baylor! *Que tal?* No hour is too late."

And after some moments of exchanging compliments in Spanish, Baylor got to the point: he had urgent business with Irina.

She was a boarder, not one of the family. And this man had been the *amo* of her late father, a great *caballero*. Thus the clean, sparsely furnished little front room was reserved for Irina and her caller.

A gaily embroidered robe with silken fringes at hem and sleeves enveloped her slender figure. She wore satin slippers that flattered her tiny feet, and a lace mantilla concealed the disarray of her blue-black hair. Irina's dark eyes glowed as she said, "I am so happy to see you. I would have kept you waiting until I could make myself presentable, only I know that something urgent brought you."

Baylor said, "I've been busy and worried, or I'd have seen you before now."

She nodded. The slippers, the robe, the mantilla, all were part of the largesse of a generous *patron* to the daughter of one of his people. He had not forgotten her; he had merely stayed away. "I understand. That *rubia* from Lincoln."

Rubia, in Spanish, could refer to Maureen, a redhead, or golden haired Anne Morell. "Yes. That damned *rubia!*" he began. "Your father served mine, well and long. You can do as much for me, if you want to. Maureen Garvey has been kidnaped. Your people miss nothing. You will hear where she is, maybe."

"You want to know, for the sake of Señor Garvey, your friend?"

"*Seguramente,*" he said, and gave her more details.

It never occurred to him that she brightened because he was not asking her to extricate Anne Morell from peril. Irina, he had always told himself, would not be jealous, simply because he had never overstepped himself by accepting the affection he could have taken.

And then Irina's arms were about him. Her lips were avid, and her dark eyes sultry with Latin ardor. He was slipping fast. The memory of those perilous nights, riding with a wounded comrade,

were undermining his loyalty to Anne Morell. . .

His brain cleared, suddenly. He gasped, "Irina—Tío Pepe's family—they'll think—and I got to ride—get busy before it's too late."

Slowly, she released him. He stumbled toward the door.

"*Vaya con Dios!*" The wistful ness of her voice stabbed him.

He knew that he had not fooled her. For a moment, he resented Anne, who never would, never could give him the unquestioning devotion that Irina offered.

He roweled his mustang, and headed for Marcia Hitchings' house. There was one more play to make.

CHAPTER VII

Tex Takes It on the Chin

AS BAYLOR approached the Hitchings' house, a window squeaked upward. A woman in shimmering silk leaned out. "That you, Rusty?"

It was Marcia. Her voice and the glint of her hair told him that. He looked up at the moon silvered arms and bare shoulders, then answered, "No, I'm Tex Baylor. Tell Rusty I come to make some peace talk."

"Oh, do you mean that? He's not home, but come on in and wait."

As he headed for the verandah steps, a lamp flared yellow behind the lace curtains.

Marcia's deshabille was charming, and she knew it. Baylor caught his breath. It was a gorgeous nightgown. So much so that she must have thought it a shame to cover it with a robe. The lamplight played with its lace panels, accented the spots where its frail fabric clung to nicely rounded curves.

"Tex, darling," she cooed, "I'll be with you in a minute. I'll send old Tuda to tell Rusty you want to see him."

She was gone before he could tell her that he'd ride in after her brother. His fingers shook as he rolled a brown paper cigarette, and took several deep drags.

His heart hammered as he waited for the siren's return. Something in her sapphire eyes had convinced him that Marcia was playing a stack on her own account.

He could not deny that she might have been dazzled by the glamour of his reputation as a gun fighter. Some women were that way.

When she returned, Marcia turned the lamp so low it barely reached the farther corners of the room. She sank back on the lounge, languourously, and murmured, "Don't be so stand-offish, Tex . . . Rusty won't be home for some time."

Marcia's lips were as compelling as her clinging arms. She snuggled closer, then breathlessly said, "I knew you didn't trust me. But you will, now that you're forgetting your grudges. You and I could be awfully happy."

"Uh—mebbe we could. But—"

"Oh, I know Rusty is a mean cuss," she said. "He'd get further if he had principles like yours. I'd heard so much about you, I tried to set you up as an example to him. He didn't like it. But he's young."

"I'm betting on you to use yore influence on Rusty. It's really that Lafe Singer I'm leery of."

Marcia fell for that touch. She sighed, pulled a shoulder strap into place, but somehow, her gown was no less revealing. "That's what I've been afraid of. Lafe's depending on riding rough shod over Jeb Garvey."

"Listen, honey," demanded Baylor. "What's Lafe got on Garvey? If you people try to flim-flam Jeb, so help me, I ain't playing, a-tall!"

"Now, Tex," she reproached, "don't get heated up. It'll work out all right. Rusty has a heap of influence with Lafe. And what's more—" She leaned back, clasped her hands behind her head, smiled wisely. "Just between you and me, dearie, I have a hand in this. Sawbuck Smith—one of Lafe's gun slicks—he's wild about me."

"The hell he is!" Baylor looked annoyed. He drew away, perceptibly. Things were working out better than he'd hoped, with Marcia's boasting.

She luxuriated in his resentment, stroked his hair, and chided, "Darling, you mustn't take it that way. I didn't say I was wild about *him.* Nor about Rusty's pardner, Wall Eye Barnes."

Baylor frowned darkly. "You got roving eyes. You're jest flim-flamming me."

He edged toward his hat. "Don't be silly!" Marcia protested.

Baylor shook his head. "You folks ain't got any sense. Neither has Jeb. He's begun getting sort of ornery. His wife's been going places, evenings. I used to know her in Lincoln, and I figure he may be suspicious."

A smile twitched at the corners of Marcia's mouth. Baylor's face grew longer. He shook his head, and went on, "A fellow kain't go explaining things when he ain't been asked to. But I been picking things up around the casino tonight. He's right smart sore about something, and she's gone."

"Really?" drawled Marcia.

"So I begun thinking. Just to keep from rubbing Jeb the wrong way, I finally allowed I'd join up with him and you folks. Only, I'm leery of Singer."

"I don't blame you," agreed Marcia. She emerged from the cushions that pillowed her shoulders. Then, leaning against him, she whispered, "You're right, too, Tex. But Maureen Garvey didn't leave of her own free will."

"What? What you mean by that?" He feigned astonishment.

"Lafe kidnaped her to get a club over Jeb. Darling," she whispered, eyes glowing, "now you'll trust me. And supposing I told you Maureen was in Zaragoza?"

Her upraised lips were tempting. Her hair was cascading down over her bare shoulders . . . but finally, as an inner door softly opened, she broke away, gasping.

Baylor started. But it was only Tuda, the wrinkled Mexican servant. She said, "*Señorita,* your brother ees occupy weeth friends. By the other side of town. He weel be happy Señor Baylor in hees own house, which ees nearer, no?"

"*Gracias, tía* Tuda," acknowledged Baylor, handing the old

woman a silver dollar. Then, to Marcia, "Honey, I better be going now."

"I'll go with you. It's lovely out. And if Rusty sees you and me getting along nicely, it'll be all the better."

A FEW minutes later, Baylor helped Marcia to the horse he had saddled while she was dressing. Knee to knee, they rode through the town that slept under the ghostly silver of the moon.

He was revising his opinions of Marcia. Her indiscreet confidences had convinced him that she must be sincere in her professed affection for him.

Once at his own house, they dismounted. He had one qualm. Suppose Knife River was there, and saw Marcia's encircling arm and upturned face as she walked with Baylor to the door?

But the place was empty as well as dark. He struck a light, and Marcia slipped close and twined her arms about his neck. She pulled his face down to hers. "Listen, you little idiot," Baylor gasped, finally breaking from her ardent lips, "we kain't be looking all fussed up when Rusty trots in."

She laughed. "Rusty won't be here for an hour or so. Old Tuda told him not to hurry." She drew him down with her onto a couch.

He resolutely banished thoughts of Anne. He had to. . .

"Darling," Marcia was murmuring, "it's just wonderful, thinking that a grudge can't keep us apart. . ."

Her warm breath in his ear sent thrills racing down his spine. He began to think that Anne had dazzled him only by her aloofness. And then he ceased thinking at all. . .

SUBCONSCIOUSLY, he was waiting for hoof beats to announce the return of Knife River, or Rusty's approach. But there was no warning when the door slammed open. Marcia cried out, jerked partly out of his arms. Then she laughed.

Anne Morell, eyes blazing, was at the threshold. Her lips were a thin red line. "You low down tramp," she said, voice low and deadly, "pretending you loved me. And playing around with Rusty Hitchings' sister. After all you've said against the tribe!"

"Anne, what in tunket—?" He was groping. He could not explain that this was a game. "How come—?"

"This, you two faced snake in the grass!" Anne drew from her bosom a sheet of paper. "Look at it—"

He stared at the paper she thrust into his hand. It read, "*Anne Morell, you quit talking against us, or your brother isn't coming back. You know what we mean, and who.*"

She flared, "So I came here to get you to help me. I saw her pinto at the post, and slipped up on foot. That's why you didn't hear me. But I'm not worrying now! Everything's all right, judging from the looks of things!"

"Uh—Anne," he gulped, not knowing which way to turn. He understood all too well: she meant that since he was Marcia Hitchings' lover, Knife River was quite safe.

Marcia rose, rested a possessive hand on his shoulder, and reached for the paper. "Darling, what's wrong?"

That gesture cracked Anne's restraint. She screamed like a cougar, and went in, clawing. "You no good hussy, you can have him! Pretend you don't know what's wrong, do you?"

"Tex!" Marcia screamed, jerking her flowing hair free from Anne's grasp. "Tex—stop her—"

They tore each other to shreds. Anne's dress in a moment was a dozen trailing pennons. Marcia's riding skirt was too solid, but her silk blouse was frail. Baylor lunged.

"Cut it out before I knock yore heads together," he yelled. "Dawg gone it, y'all think this is a insane asylum?"

The combatants landed on the couch, Marcia beneath. But when Tex dragged Anne away, she had a good bit of her rival's lingerie in her hands. Baylor's firm grip sobered her. She flung the crumpled silk and lace at Marcia, and said, very calmly despite her rapid breathing, "Tex, I hope to die and rot and may the buzzards pick my eyes out if I ever speak to you! You low down, no good saddle tramp, you got my brother mixed up in a mess in New Mexico, then you put him to work in your filthy gambling house, and now you've capped it, beautifully."

SHE deliberately picked up the note and turned to the door. Had he dared explain, she would not have waited. Then came a clatter of hoofs. He shrugged, wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Marcia's voice was very soft when she said, "Tex, dear, I'm awfully sorry—"

"Damn it," he flared, "you crawling all over me—"

"Now, Tex, I know I insisted on coming with you, but do you think I knew she'd be here? That she'd bust in?"

He shrugged, then sat down, propping his chin on his hands. "Mebbe not. Well, what the hell!"

Marcia balanced herself on the arm of his chair, and had to lean close to maintain her perch. She said, "Tex, I'm sorry. But with all she's stored up and held against you, do you believe she ever could care for you?"

That hit him on the chin. "I reckon not."

Marcia saw he was hurt more than he would admit, and she was glad. But it was time to leave. She slipped to her feet, made an attempt to pull her ruined blouse together. "I better be going now. If Rusty shows up, tell him I was tired of waiting. I'd rather he didn't see me, looking this way."

He did not look up. But Marcia understood. The longer he pondered, the more Anne would seem in the wrong, causing such an outrageous scene. Rusty Hitchings' sister was smiling, and her eyes were very bright as she slowly rode home. In her way, she thought of the lean gunner from Lincoln...

Neither of the captives, Baylor reasoned, was in acute peril. Rather, they were hostages to compel him and Garvey to go whole hog, to the very last bristle.

Baylor needed rest. He dozed in his chair. Finally, awakening

with a start, he noted the hour. Rusty, he concluded, had changed his mind about the meeting.

CHAPTER VIII

A Midnight Visit

THE following day, Rusty and Wall Eye Barnes called at the casino. The buck toothed gunner wore ivory handled Colts, a costly Stetson, and a purple kerchief. He walked in with a swagger and a grin, but Wall Eye remained sour and hatchet faced. He looked as if he had gotten his walking papers from Marcia. He scowled, fumbled with the silver buttons of his vest. He'd have the top one twisted off if he kept that up.

"Sis told me," began Rusty, "that you're listening to reason. Only by the time I got around tuh seeing yuh last night, I'd done gargled too much red-eye to talk business."

"I'll help you jaspers clean up Sierra Blanca," said Baylor, "only I got to close out the Casino first, in case I have to shake a hock real fast."

Rusty's smile was knowing. "Jest like I told yuh, Wall Eye."

"Now," resumed Baylor, "You're friendly with Singer. Y'all see him and tell him I changed my mind. Jeb sorta helping me."

That ended the meeting. He had gained the time he needed. And once El Paso's lights were aglow, he set out to make the most of his respite.

An hour's ride brought him to the farm where horses, arms, and supplies for flight into Mexico were waiting. His foresight was now giving him an advantage in a situation he had not anticipated.

Irina met him at the door of the neat little 'dobe.

"*Valgame Dios!*" she exclaimed, eyes widening. "Did you meet old Tío Pepe on the way? I sent him with a message. About that *rubia.*"

Baylor shook his head. "No matter. I done got the information, a mite unexpectedly. Maureen and Knife River are in Zaragoza. Get me some of Tío Pepe's *charro* duds. I'll take one of his hosses and saddles. Then I'm taking a *pasear* acrost the river, and loop into that vest pocket sized hell's hole from the Mexican side."

"Don't. From either way, it is deadly," she warned.

"Mebbe so. But it ain't as bad as going to Ysleta and crossing. If I'm spotted in there, they'd be a reception committee tuh nail me when I get back. But going in the back door gives me a chanct."

"*Madre de Dios!* You, alone, getting two prisoners?"

Baylor grinned. "A chanct, honey. I ain't never asked for more. Now you run along an' get me Tío Pepe's duds."

The moon had not yet risen when Baylor spurred Tío Pepe's black horse down the steep bank, and across the dry bottom in whose middle ran a shallow ghost of what the first heavy rain would make a raging torrent. He wore a high crowned hat. A dark serapi hung from his shoulders. Irina had stained his face, so that the gambling house pallor would not make him too conspicuous.

"Watch it!" he cried, whirling, and throwing her backward.

Somewhere in Mexico a coyote was yapping. Another answered, crying like a woman in pain. A hoot owl mocked the night, and one flew past Baylor, startling him with the beat of its wings in his face.

All this desolation was alive. At any moment, he might run afoul of one of the outlaw bands that slipped over the river for robbery or cattle stealing. And then the moon rose, casting its treacherous glamour over the barren, rolling country to the south.

An hour passed. Then another. Baylor's wide circuit finally swung northward, toward the furtively winking lights that had become his beacon: Zaragoza, where a man

might be murdered for a pair of boots.

In the distance he heard an occasional sleepy bawling, a vague stirring. The scent of cattle came to his nostrils as the breeze shifted. Somewhere, a man was singing as he rode night guard. A large trail herd was bedded down, well southeast of Zaragoza.

Baylor could not even guess the number. He knew only that there were many. But a trick of the wind for a moment brought him a snatch of the cowpuncher's song that reminded him of old days in Lincoln and Fort Sumner. His heart began thumping.

Could that be one of Conway Pratt's herds? Stolen stock, hustled across the river to cast suspicion on Mexican rustlers, then brought north again, with brands altered?

"Gawd . . . his fool's luck," Baylor growled. "Rushing me, catching me when I kain't nail him."

For a moment he paused, indecisive. He had ridden closer, and some distance out of his way. He now knew that it was indeed a great herd, and watched by Americans who had Mexican helpers: the voices told him that. Then he swallowed the urge to start a stampede. One man could do that, easily.

"No percentage there," he said to himself. "Got to nail that skunk in Texas. And mebbe 'tain't Pratt's herd, nohow."

He realized that eagerness for vengeance and fear of being cheated at the last moment had made him assume more than he had a right to; and that his business was in Zaragoza, regardless.

Cool headed again, he remembered Anne, and his resolution. The play was to help Jeb Garvey, and extricate Knife River. He'd as much as promised Anne he was through with revenge and justified lawlessness.

So he headed back toward Zaragoza.

THE dusty main street led to a plaza that was commanded by a church. White washed 'dobes gleamed like monstrous dice cast into the desert. Lights glowed in a tavern, and the several saloons. He identified the jail and town hall. They were both under one flat roof whose packed clay was supported by cottonwood timbers which jutted out beyond the parapet.

There was not much to Zaragoza, but that sprawl of houses was all too large for a stranger who had to work quickly and without fail. Neither could he inquire for Lafe Singer's house. That would make him conspicuous. Morover, Singer might not have a residence in Zaragoza; merely headquarters.

A quick survey of the saloons and the number of horses in front of each gave him his cue. His choice was *Alhaja del Rio.* He dismounted and swaggered into the smoke-thickened air of the "Jewel of the River."

Swarthy Mexicans and half-breeds predominated, but there was a fair scattering of evil-faced Americans at the wooden tables which dotted the hard-packed dirt floor.

The bartender poured a slug of *tequila negra.* His beady black eyes were no more revealing than

his blank face. Baylor, swallowing the smooth, fiery liquor, flashed a glance at the fly specked mirror.

No one was eyeing him, but that meant nothing. However, the buzz of conversation and the click of poker chips had kept an even tempo. Baylor said to the bartender, "*Señor,* perhaps you can help me. I have urgent business with the mayor. And I am not sure which is his house. At this hour, I would not want to make a mistake."

"Don Gaspar," was the reply, "is in town. But whether he will see you—"

"When he knows who is calling," Baylor cut in, with the haughtiness of self assurance, "he will know what to do. Give this *peso* to one of the waiters you can spare. If one of them knows the way."

There was but a single waiter, cigarette stump drooping from his lip, dirty bar towel draped from his forearm; hence Baylor's polite exaggeration. That, and the *peso* did the work.

"Pablo! *Venga aqui!* Go with this gentleman, but hurry back!"

Pablo, however, had to wipe the table, gather empty glasses. One worked with deliberation, across the Rio Grande. Baylor gestured for his glass to be refilled. Then he froze.

A burly man with cold eyes, a beak of a nose, and drooping white moustaches had stepped into the doorway. His thumbs were hooked in his cartridge belt. His boots were dusty, and dust grayed his square, grim face.

Conway Pratt, king of the Pecos, had business in Zaragoza important enough to demand his presence. His eyes roved down the depth of the dingy cantina, passing from table to table. Pablo's table wiping had ended. He glanced at Baylor, patiently waiting for him to drain his glass.

The bartender had observed the newcomer. If Baylor risked ducking toward the door opening into the kitchen before Pratt noticed him, he would still make himself conspicuous. His assumed importance should not shrink from any man; it was his only safeguard in Zaragoza.

This was the man, face to face; the man he had never expected to meet, toe to toe. The best Baylor had hoped was a blow at Pratt's security. Ice raced through his veins, and his hands, things almost separate from the rest of him, were ready to go for his guns.

But his dry lips did not shape the challenge in his heart. He had to extricate Knife River. A shooting now would upset his plans. Too many people would wonder why he had pulled down on Pratt. Baylor lifted his hat, gave his *serapi* a flourish, and said to the bartender, "*Gracias, señor.* Pablo, *vamonos!*"

Pratt was half way down the two yard width of clear floor that ran between bar and tables, from the street to the rear. His chilly eyes caught Baylor's. Time ceased, but Tex's pace was unbroken.

"*Buenos noches, señor!*" he bade the man responsible for his father's death. He lifted his hat, and Pratt grunted a reply.

They had met, had passed. Pratt, mistaking Baylor's bow for the instinctive courtesy of a Mexi-

can gentleman, had not recognized the young squirt who had gunned out Gabe Rutter. It was not until Tex reached the street that he realized that that arrogant scrutiny of the entire cantina could scarcely have centered on just another man in a *serapi*. It had not occurred to him that a year of exile had tightened his mouth, hardened his eyes, solidified his entire expression.

But for whatever purpose Pratt was in town, his presence was an axe over Baylor's neck. "Gawd," he muttered, shaping his first prayer for many a month, "keep it from hittin' until I get that damn' fool Knife River acrost to the other side."

His legs trembled, and so did his hands, now that he did not need them. He mounted his horse to follow Pablo. No *caballero* would walk fifty feet, except at the point of a gun. And as he crossed the plaza, he conquered the nausea that the suspense had brought on.

Then he grinned. "It's a sign. The dirty son's delivered, ready fer picking. I'll git him, pussonally! To hell with his cattle!"

And that decision made him feel new and young again. Shooting it out, toe to toe; that was the Baylor way.

PABLO halted a block north of the square, and indicated a two story house. Excepting for the cathedral, it was the largest in town. Barred windows from the second floor stared like the eye sockets of a cubical skull. A large double door, iron bound, opened from the further corner: an entrance for ox carts, Baylor judged from the wheel tracks, as well as for horsemen.

He tossed a coin to his guide. Dismounting, he approached the small door at the center, and pounded the brazen knocker. A porter cursed sleepily, then opened a small barred grating in the panel, and demanded, "*Que pasa?*"

"Let me see Don Gaspar. *Pronto!*"

"Who comes?"

"*Piojoso cabron!* Do you think he'd recognize the name I'm using? Or thank you for making him wait to see me?"

He was betting that the mayor was on a par with his town: accustomed to and interested in people who rode by night. Thus he won the exchange. The porter pulled a bolt aside, thrust a lighted lantern into Baylor's face.

"*Por Dios! Un Tejano!*" he growled, seeing the steel colored eyes under the sombrero brim.

"I guess Don Gaspar never deals with Texans, eh? Quick, you fool!"

The porter began to understand; or he thought he did. One man, even a Texan could not be dangerous. "Be pleased to step in, *señor*. I will see the *amo*."

As he waited for curiosity to get the best of Don Gaspar, Baylor sized up the flagged patio, the servant quarters along one of the high brick walls; the ox carts, the great earthen ware jars, and the small ones that stood in an angle. Point by point, he was preparing his retreat; the second floor balconies that overhung the court might feature . . . One could never tell.

Then, just for luck, he softly edged the bolt from its socket. He

cut a corner from his serapi, opened the door, and carefully jammed it shut against the triangle of heavy, hard twisted wool. That would keep it from blowing open and making a hinge creak to warn the porter.

He had scarcely completed his moonlight survey of the court when the porter returned, saying, "It is well, *señor.* Don Gaspar will see you."

Baylor followed the fellow as he shuffled down the dark arcade and toward a doorway from which a shaft of light reached into the patio.

In the high ceiled room, which was illuminated by a single taper, stood a pudgy man with upward pointing moustaches as black as his eyes. He wore trousers, leather sandals, and a *serapi.* A bunch of keys lay on the table. Baylor bowed and apologized, "Don Gaspar, I am intruding. But it is necessary."

He hefted a tinkling pouch of gold. Don Gaspar brightened. He was always ready to buy someone else's cattle.

Baylor glanced furtively over his shoulder. "The door, Don Gaspar."

"You are among friends," the mayor assured, rubbing his fat hands.

But to humor his visitor, he came forward and shut the door. That move distracted him. He had never a chance to go for the gun thrust into the waistband of his trousers. Baylor's Colt prodded his ribs, and the heavy panel blocked his gasp of surprise.

"*Como—porque—por dios—*"

"Do as I say, and you'll live," commanded Baylor, pocketing the mayor's gun. "Otherwise, I'll blow your guts out!"

Don Gaspar's face gleamed with a sudden rush of sweat. There must be a troop of *Tejanos* outside, or this fellow would never venture a trick like that!

"If you want money—"

"There are two prisoners in Zaragoza. The rubia, *Señora* Garvey. And Knife River Morell."

"*Sanctísima madre!* You are Tex Baylor?"

There was no point in denial. Baylor smiled amiably but his eyes were deadly: a combination to shake Don Gaspar. "I don't give much of a damn if I get out of here or not, unless my friends go with me. If they's any shooting, you are first."

"But—what you want—eh?"

"You're the mayor. Nothing goes on in Zaragoza without you knowing it. Where's Lafe Singer got them hidden?"

"*Por amor de Dios!* I do not know."

"Then I must kill you and go on hunting. By jamming this gun right close to your belly, there won't be any noise your porter can hear, not with the door closed. That way, nobody'll miss you, and I'll have till morning to inquire elsewhere."

His cool, deadly drawl made Don Gaspar turn ash gray. He licked his lips, then said, "Wait until I get dressed. I will go with you."

"Them pants are plenty good," said Tex. "So is that *serapi.* Let's go."

That whipped the mayor. "*Sangre de Cristo,*" he groaned, reaching for his keys. "Singer, he will

murder me. They are in the house, upstairs."

CHAPTER IX

Irina Plays a Hunch

AT THE end of the hall, the mayor paused at a door, fumbled with the bunch of keys. The lock grated. By the taper light, Baylor saw a woman whose bare arms and shoulders gleamed ivory white. Her hair was copper red against the pillow.

She sat up, startled, exclaimed sleepily. Then she hastily drew the blanket up to her chin. It was Maureen Garvey.

"Get dressed," said Baylor. "We're going home."

"Oh—Tex—how—where's Knife River?"

"Get busy." Then, to Don Gaspar: "Next customer!"

A moment later, Knife River Morell was on his feet, blinking in the taper light and saying, "Tex, I don't dast go back to El Paso."

"Git your boots on. Tell Maureen to shake it up. Meet me in the patio. I'll tell Garvey you two didn't share the same cell, if that's what you're afraid of. All right, Don Gaspar. Now you're going to saddle up some horses."

He followed the mayor down the stairs that led to the inner end of the court. As they headed toward the stable where the choice beasts were kept, Baylor sensed danger. He whirled, jerking his gun from Don Gaspar's side. Simultaneously, a blow numbed his arm. The Colt dropped from his paralyzed fingers.

"I was afeard I'd have tuh shoot yuh, Tex," drawled an ironic voice. "This shotgun barrel ain't bent from cracking yuh, so take it easy. Don't want to cut yuh off hip-high, but I will, by gravy, if I have to."

"*Valgame Dios!*" gasped Don Gaspar. "*Señor* Singer, what is this?"

"More luck," chuckled Singer. "Just heard in Ysleta that this jughead was making a raid, so I come over tuh warn you. The front door was wide open, an' yore flunkey was full of *sotol,* lyin' on the floor. So I snuck in. Dang lucky."

"What? Gregorio asleep? He was not, ten minutes past." Don Gaspar snatched his gun from Baylor's pocket. "Something is wrong. Quick! The prisoners are getting ready to leave."

"Jest bar the front door, Gaspar, while I palaver with this squirt. But fust, grab that other hawg leg he's got holstered."

Lafe Singer owned Don Gaspar, and the mayor in turn owned the town.

"Bring your prisoner, *amigo,*" he said, gesturing for Baylor to step into the living room on the ground floor. "Looks like these folks need some talking to."

"You ain't fired yet, Lafe," growled Baylor.

"Shucks! Yo're too useful tuh kill. I could of got yuh in the court. Don't that prove I ain't whut yuh claimed I was? Seems like if we understood and trusted each other, we might git along."

"Trust?" Baylor snatched at the opening. He had to shake Singer, somehow. "Listen, you jug-

head! Yo're too dumb for me to work with."

"What yuh mean?"

"You trust the wrong people. How the hell do you suppose I found where Maureen was locked up? Who you suppose told me?" He grinned, nodded, waited for that barbed shaft to sink in.

"Lucky guess!" snorted Singer; but his eyes were worried. Someone had betrayed him, or worse, had babbled out of sheer stupidity.

"You know it warn't a guess. Mebbe you'd like to hear me mention names, huh?" Baylor paused. "For the hide of one loose mouthed jasper, you might turn Maureen loose, and win by the deal?"

But that was interrupted by the arrival of Maureen and Knife River, coming in from the hall. Don Gaspar was behind them.

The redhead's eyes were wide, and her face was pale. Knife River was well marked from the skirmish that had ended in his capture. Singer, standing so that he could face Baylor and also watch the doorway, demanded, "Gaspar, whut's *he* doing here? That two-headed button?"

"Jeez, Tex," gasped Knife River, "now whut—how come—?"

"Jest one of them things, pardner," answered Baylor, giving him a shut-up look. The box hadn't been dealt out yet, however it might look. And what was the idea of Singer being surprised to see Knife River?

"Ees wan of the prisoner," Don Gaspar answered Lafe's query in English. Singer avoided Spanish when possible. "I keep heem so he weel not go back to Paso del Norte. If this ees wrong, your men have the fault. They could easy keel heem."

Singer grinned. "Hell, yes! Your pardner, eh, Baylor? That shore makes it nice. One more piece of foolishness, and he gets buried deep."

THE mayor was still beyond reach. Baylor, from the corner of his eyes, had measured the distance. He knew that Singer's shotgun would do its work long before Don Gaspar and a Colt could be reached. Maureen was in the way. She hampered Knife River, clung to him, half hysterical at this sudden reverse.

The mayor and Singer thought that Baylor had sapped the porter. Something was in the wind, but what? Was Pratt on the warpath, ready to break in? God, if he only knew! He felt that doom was hovering. But at any moment, he would be marched to the river and Ysleta; the captives, back to their cells.

"Whilst we're here, Lafe," he stalled, "let's understand each other. You need Garvey's good will, not jest a club over him. Holding Maureen here ain't so bad. But getting Knife River into it gives it a nasty flavor."

"You comprehend," interpolated the mayor, "he ees the lady's lover, no? *Señor* Garvey ees annoy if he finds out. He weel not care eef you keel the lady or keep her yourself. Me, I would like to keep, but that ees not business."

"Hmmm . . ." Lafe frowned, abstractedly stroked the lock of his

shotgun. "Don Gaspar's correct as hell. Mebbe if I turned Knife River loose, he could shake a hock. Git put in jail in Balmorhea, whar I got connections. Thattaway when he showed up, he could prove he was in the hoosegow all the time."

"Uhuh. That's to pertect Maureen's reppitation," conceded Baylor.

"Oh—don't leave me here," moaned Maureen.

"Tex," said Singer, "yuh kin have yore guns in Ysleta. Then yo're heading for Sierra Blanca with a star on yore vest. Jeb kain't back down."

"So yo're aiming tuh turn Maureen loose as soon as I gits my claws into them nesters, huh?" Baylor was imperceptibly edging toward Don Gaspar. Once he was close enough, Singer would not dare shoot, lest he riddle the mayor, a very valuable man. "If I can *depend* on that, Lafe—"

"Shucks, Tex! Yuh kin trust me. Consarn it, it makes a man feel downright rotten, seein' how folks are plumb poison with suspicion. Young feller, yuh string along, and—"

But the sales talk was interrupted. The mayor yelled. Knife River flung Maureen aside. Pottery shattered across Singer's head, spattered to the tiles. The oration froze on his lips, and as he dropped, his shotgun poured both carges into the wall. It had shifted, during the instant following that blow from the rear, and Don Gaspar, scorched by the flame, was dancing about, howling and slapping his hip.

As he made a dive for the mayor, Baylor saw what had happened: A dark-haired girl had appeared as if from nowhere and had cracked Singer with an earthen ware jar. Irina! How she had reached Zaragoza was of no import, but here she was, eyes agleam, face pale with excitement. "Quick—to the front—the porter, I have finish him!" She tugged Baylor's arm. "Your horse. Mine. Singer's. Ees plenty, no?"

"Grab some iron, you jughead!" Baylor yelled to Knife River, recovering his own guns and tapping Don Gaspar across the head. "Grab Maureen! She's out cold!"

The shock had severely shaken Jeb's wife. Knife River carried her. Irina ran ahead, toward the horses in the street. Baylor's guns drove the servants howling back to the quarters from which the disturbance had routed them.

In a moment, the saddles were filled.

"Fer Gawd's sake, head down the river!" yelled Baylor, as Knife River took the lead. "Keep outen Ysleta!"

THE drumming of hoofs drowned his voice. He spurred his beast to catch up. But pistol blasts and zinging lead made him concentrate on the rear. Men were pouring out of the saloons on the plaza, bounding to their mounts. Irina remained with Baylor, cocking Lafe Singer's .45 with both hands and blazing away merrily.

"Git away, yuh dang little fool!" Baylor howled.

His gun jumped. A saddle emptied. Irina laughed. "See, I can shoot."

"Git away! I done that! Yo're hitting the church!"

"Ees fun, anyway," she laughed. "And it scares them."

Knife River, both arms filled with Maureen, could do nothing but ride. He swung around a corner. Baylor gained, and for a few seconds, they were clear of pursuit.

"Cut it out before I knock yore heads together," Tex yelled.

The church bell was ringing. The inhabitants were turning out. Guns began blasting from 'dobe shacks.

Baylor's party, now fanning out to present a less certain target, ploughed through the sands. The river was near. The pursuit, still on hard ground, was gaining. Baylor frantically reloaded his guns. He yelled, "Irina, you damn' fool, keep going! I'll hold 'em!"

Knife River was wheeling. He yelled, "Maureen kin hang on by herself. Gives me a chanct tuh jine the party!"

Baylor's guns drummed. For an instant, he had the pursuers skylined. Two saddles emptied. The fugitives scrambled down the steep bank, and splashed across the shallow Rio Grande.

They had won. But Ysleta, aroused by the fusillade, was turning out in force. Knife River began to realize his mistake. "Lord," he groaned, "I shore went and done it. I got too dang excited."

"We'll make it!" With a yell, Baylor spurred into the lead, and up the northern bank. He "rolled" his pistols. Not the senseless procedure it might have seemed, since the incredibly rapid drumming fire would drive meddlers to cover, leaving only serious minded enemies to be dealt with.

Guns were already crackling. Don Gaspar's allies on the American side knew something was wrong, and they were not bothering to ask what. Baylor swung downstream. Then, too late, he saw a group of horsemen swoop from the town's outskirts, cutting off that line of retreat.

"Maureen's hurt," yelled Knife River, pulling alongside.

"I wisht tuh Gawd she was kilt, and you, too!" growled Baylor. "Shake a hock, damn yore hide! Or we're buzzard bait."

Knife River's mount staggered, pitched in a heap.

Baylor groaned as he reined in. Irina dismounted to give him a hand.

"*Sanctísima madre!* These are friends!" she cried. The approaching horsemen were firing toward town. Slugs no longer zipped about Baylor's ears. He recognized a familiar voice. He turned from Knife River, who was still stunned by the shock. Maureen had hampered him, else he would have fallen clear of his mount.

Jeb Garvey pulled up. The riders at his heels had the situation in hand.

"She's here, Jeb!" panted Baylor.

"Uhuh. I been noticing that," the older man bitterly growled.

"Uh—what—?" Baylor, taken aback, whirled to his left.

The frosty moon told him the story. Maureen, dazed by the fall, was clinging to Knife River. What she said in her hysteria was damning. Garvey went for his gun.

Baylor lunged, panther swift. He knocked the weapon aside.

"Jeb, this ain't no time tuh fight. She's clear. Ain't none of yore men seen nuthing but a dead hoss."

Irina, quick witted, knelt beside the groggy pair, camouflaging the tangle. Jeb Garvey answered, "Mebbe I better pull in my horns. But yo're a gol dang sidewinder, Tex. Yuh knew that young pole cat was with Maureen. That they was carrying on."

Baylor shrugged. Nothing he could say would square things. Jeb Garvey was decidedly through with him. And but for the presence of the riders who were drawing up, smouldering hostility would have burst into flame.

They helped Maureen to a horse, and gave Knife River a mount when they returned through Ysleta, a town now well subdued. Irina and Baylor rode somewhat apart, with Knife River and his thoughts to bring up the rear.

"Tex," she said, "I am sorry. Ees my fault. I was afraid for you. So I tol' *Señor* Garvey to wait in Ysleta. Because if he went over, it maybe start the alarm and keel you."

"But you snuck over, yuh dang little idiot?"

Her smile and her eyes for an instant dazzled him. Then she became sombre as a brooding goddess, and answered, "My father was the frien' of yours. Why would I not play the hunch for you?"

For a moment, Baylor wished that Anne Morell were lost in some bottomless pit. It would simplify things a lot. Then he began making excuses for her, and the memory of her white and gold beauty did the rest.

CHAPTER X

Undercover Rustler

THE following day, Baylor sombrely took stock. Knife River had hurried to Anne's hotel to square things up, being an optimist at heart. Maureen was in the hospital with a flesh wound; and Jeb was hostile. That meant the end of a good hideout.

The only thing to do was to light a shuck. Lafe Singer was alive and raging. In his sour mood, Baylor again considered the stroke of vengeance against Conway Pratt, who must have learned who caused the riot in Zaragoza. He had to have that shot at his enemy, then dive for cover, somewhere in Sonora, perhaps. Or California. *Quien sabe?*

"But that raid to nail Pratt when he crossed the river." He pondered. "Only way I kin git me some riders now is from Rusty Hitchings."

He jammed on his hat, belted on his guns, and saddled up. First, try and square himself with Anne. Or else go plumb busted. One way or the other.

But hoofbeats in front brought him hurrying from the stable.

Rusty Hitchings and Marcia were riding up. Wall Eye Barnes accompanied them. Rusty said, "Jest droppin' in tuh make a bit of medicine talk, Tex."

"Light and set," Baylor invited.

Once in the house, Rusty came to the point: "I heard you and Jeb busted up, and Jeb's on the prod fer Knife River; you know why."

"A feller does hear things," Baylor noncommittally answered, though inside, he froze at hearing how the story had spread. Humiliating gossip would put Garvey actively on the prod. That made haste more urgent than ever. "What's on your respective minds?"

Knife River would kill Garvey, or it would be the other way about.

In either case, Anne would say that Tex was another word for poison.

"Jest this," said Rusty. He flashed a glance at Wall Eye, and grumbled.

"Git yore paws plenty far from that smoke poke, yuh lunkhead. Ain't I told yuh Tex ain't hostile?"

"I reckon," said Wall Eye, laying his hands palms flat on the table. "Jest absent minded."

Marcia flashed him a honey-dripping glance, and edged closer. "Now, Wall Eye," she chided, "you're so impulsive."

She caught his hand, stroked his shaggy hair into place. But as Rusty got down to business, Marcia contrived to give Baylor an eloquent look that meant, "I've got to keep this polecat so he'll stay sweet. It doesn't mean a thing...."

He nodded his understanding. The conference quickly got to brass tacks. Since Anne was considered definitely out of the picture, though no one was tactless enough to mention her name, there were no strings on Tex. It boiled down to, "Rusty, I ain't cleaning out nesters in Sierra Blanca, and yuh might as well know it. But I'm honing tuh scatter Conway Pratt's herd from hell tuh breakfast. Now, Jeb kin block me when I try to sell out the Casino. He's sore enough to."

"Yuh kin stop that, Tex," interpolated Wall Eye. "Let him draw fust."

"Jeb done right by me, and I ain't hitting back," Baylor declared. "With him on the prod, I'm busted, flat. It'll take men and money tuh nail Conway, change the brands on his trail herd, hide 'em out until we kin sell 'em. I'm paying the Sierra Blanca squatters. Ain't gunning 'em out, with or without a star. Get it?" He had to misrepresent his plans in order to appeal to the avarice of his allies, who had no vengeance at stake.

"Plain," allowed Rusty.

"Right now, you got more *dinero* than I have," Baylor resumed.

Rusty scratched his head. He pulled a long face, and for once his mouth tightened enough to hide his buck teeth. "Tex," he finally said, "me an' Wall Eye is stepping outside fer a confidential powow. Mebbe we kin and mebbe we kain't raise up the money."

The partners ambled out of the room. Marcia whispered, "Tex dear, I don't know why that fool brought Wall Eye. Or let him suspect I like you a lot. But once this is settled, you and I can go somewhere together. For keeps, I mean."

"I allow we can." His tone was guarded, but his wary glance toward the door justified him for his lack of animation.

"Oh, that'll be wonderful," she sighed. "We've got so much in common, haven't we?"

She drew away, just in time for Wall Eye to miss the long kiss that Baylor could not avoid. He wondered if betraying rouge marked his mouth.

The conference ended in a few moments. "Day after tomorrow," Rusty said, "Wall Eye and me'll have the money and the men."

BUT that afternoon, thinking it over, Baylor decided on a final attempt at reconciliation with Jeb,

whose bitter accusations rankled. He could not leave El Paso, and have Garvey think that friendship had meant so little. It was bad enough the way Maureen had treated him.

He learned at the Red Mill that Jeb had not showed up that day. The house manager allowed that maybe the boss was home, licking his wounds. "And if yuh ask me, Tex," he concluded, "yuh'd jest as well not see him. Shore, I know yuh warn't foolin' around with Mis' Garvey, but . . ."

Baylor, however, persisted in his attention. He wanted to get that cleared up before he saw Anne.

Garvey lived in the old house of a former Spanish official. It was some distance from the outskirts of town, its cubical bulk crowning a knoll that commanded the distant river. As Baylor approached his destination, a rider came galloping from the grounds. In the sunset light, he recognized Knife River and his pinto.

"Pull up!" Baylor shouted. "What the hell you doing here?"

The freckled cowpuncher jerked his mustang to its haunches. "Plenty," he panted. "Me, I'm lighting a shuck."

"It's about time! I been looking for you. Then I figured I better see Jeb and try to talk him offen the warpath. You stick around while I see him."

"Ain't no use," persisted Knife River. "Yuh kain't argue with Jeb."

"Why the hell not?"

"He's deader'n hell."

"What?"

"Plumb dead. Ain't nobody to home. No servants, since Maureen's gone to the hospital."

"You damn' young t'rantler, yuh shot it out with him?"

"Honest to Gawd, I didn't. I went out tuh make a peace talk."

"Damn' fool notion if I ever heard one."

"Shore it was," Knife River admitted. "But I felt sort of rotten about it all, him being your friend. I allowed mebbe I could convince Jeb that Maureen and me hadn't done nothing really desperate."

"Except letting Singer ketch the two of yuh in Ysleta at the Drover's Haven."

"Huh? How come you got them —ah, details?"

"Rusty Hitchings knew all about it. So does everyone."

"Gosh, Tex!" He mopped the sweat from his forehead. "He was plumb dead when I come in. Door was open. No one answered. But I figgered—"

"Yuh gol dang blockhaid, yuh never figgered in yore life exceptin' ways tuh git yoreself intuh a heap of trouble. Come on in while I look around. Mebbe he's jest unconscious."

Knife River followed Baylor into the house. Jeb Garvey lay sprawled in his chair. A shot in the back of the head had made a gory horror of his face. His strong box was open, and the contents were scattered about. Baylor instinctively lifted his hat.

"Pore devil," he muttered. "He didn't deserve this. Kid, I know now that you didn't gun him out. Not from the back. Never had a chanct to get his derringers out of his sleeves."

"Try an' make the rest of the

town swaller that," muttered Knife River. "I'll end up dancing with my boots in the air now, unless I light fer Mexico."

"Hell!" growled Baylor, "yuh don't know the country like I do, an' yuh don't know enough Spiggoty talk neither. Not enough to go alone. I'll ride with you."

Knife River wiped the sweat from his face. He suddenly straightened up, his white face set in grim angles. "Y'ain't neither, Tex. My damn' foolishness always got yuh in bad with Anne. And I got her hostile telling her, joking like, about what a nice gal Irina was, and how she was purty sweet on you, what with us three lighting out of Lincoln and her helping take care of me."

Baylor was beyond saying anything. Knife River's diabolical sense of humor had paved the way for Anne's explosion when she saw Marcia Hitchings getting in a play. No wonder Anne went hog wild, after that young idiot's innocent fun, as he must have called it!

Knife River went on, "I'm surrendering. Fer onct I ain't handicapping you. Hell, I kin prove somehow, I didn't do it."

Baylor recognized the desperate resolve to make amends at one swoop. He said, "Fer onct, don't be a dang idjit! You gettin' lynched ain't helping me with Anne. That's jest what'd happen, after that mess in Yselta, people thinkin' yuh stole a gent's wife, then popped him in back of the head.

"That dang blasted Marcia Hitchings completely sunk me with Anne. Now you sit tight and watch, whilst I look around tuh see whut's been a-going on here. If anyone shows up, you sneak out the back, and up the river. You know—"

"Uhuh. Where yuh got hosses, guns, money, and Irina watching the stuff at Tío Pepe's sod busting spread."

IN a few minutes, Baylor learned much about the late Jeb Garvey. There were bills of sale for cattle in batches of a thousand, two thousand head. Piece by piece, he traced the extent of Jeb's dealings. He recognized one name after another, all notorious border characters. He began to realize how little he had known about his protector and friend, though some was guesswork and inference.

Garvey had been trading in wet cattle with Conway Pratt, indirectly. One of the bills of sale was on the table, blood spattered. One thousand critters, delivered by Wall Eye Barnes to Marfa, some weeks ago, were covered by the papers.

"Wall Eye Barnes, the dirty—!" he muttered, as understanding penetrated the confusion, and gave him a clear picture of the whole. "Conway Pratt's under cover man, working for Rusty Hitchings to keep up appearances. Wall Eye brings this yere bill of sale to pore Jeb, to collect whut's due at Pratt's end. Jeb's back's turned. He don't suspect nuthing, or them derringers'd come outen his sleeves like snakes ducking fer a hole!

"He kilt Jeb to grab the money and blame it on robbery or something."

Wall Eye had left the bill of sale,

perhaps in haste, perhaps from superstitious horror of actually wetting his hands on a paper stained with the blood and brains of the man he had treacherously slain. "Or," Baylor added, "leaving it here with other stuff on the desk'd make it look like Jeb was porin' over impo'tant stuff an' didn't hear the jasper that was gitting ready to gun him out."

The case against Wall Eye was legally weak. Only a person fairly well posted on Jeb's secret activities would get the point. And El Paso law would rather not see the argument. Those papers were far too ticklish ever to come into open court. But Baylor saw a use for them. He folded the batch, stuffed them into his shirt, and strode out.

"Knife River," he said, "you head for Irina's and hide out. I see a chanct to clear you. If I jest kain't make it, and things get out of hand, you'll see the necktie gang long afore they get to her place, and you kin start riding. Assumin' they do suspect me of ownin' it, and you bein' there."

"What yuh aimin' to do, Tex?"

"Gawd might know, exactly. Me, I'm jest playing a hunch. Now you git going. Don't try to see Anne. I'll do that. And sit tight."

He noticed the gold pieces that gleamed near the hearth. A rotted bag lay near it, flung aside by the slayer and looter. Its heavy cargo had broken it, and the thief had not taken time to scoop up each coin. Marks in the dust at the bottom of the strong box showed where other pokes had lain. This was Jeb Garvey's war chest; money for "private" deals, or in anticipation of the day when he might have to leave town in a hurry.

The gold piece was Spanish, and bore the image of Charles IV, a relic of the days when Spain owned Louisiana, Florida, all the vast lands west of the Mississippi, and Mexico to boot.

"Pore Jeb," he muttered, pocketing the coin. "I'll take this'n fer a keepsake." Another winked out from a corner, but he ignored it.

Knife River followed him to the yard.

"They'll nail you," he protested, "if you hang around town."

"Ain't got no cause. Plenty people figure I'd be coming out here to make peace on yore account. Nobody'd say I shot Jeb back of the head. But with me lighting a shuck, it shore would look queer. See?"

"Uhuh. Plain."

Baylor wheeled his horse, and they parted in the gloom.

CHAPTER XI

A Clean Sweep

BAYLOR galloped into town. As he left his horse at the hitching rack in front of Anne's hotel, Dallas Hardin stalked by, shotgun in the crook of his left arm.

"Jest a second, bub," he drawled. "Don't be in such a hurry."

Baylor's heart rose in his throat. Had Jeb's slayer accused him?

"What's under your hat, Dallas?"

The marshal came closer and hoarsely whispered, "Tex, they's a ranger in town. A long galoot with bone-handled guns and a

hatchet face. Sergeant McIntyre. Ef yuh got suthin' on yore conscience, yuh better dust quick!"

McIntyre, the toughest hombre on the Rio Grande. That meant business. El Paso would step lightly. The law was reaching westward.

"Thanks, Dallas."

"Anyway you kin tell Jeb?"

"Afeard not," answered Baylor.

He stalked through the lobby. The sergeant would not recognize him, until some enemy offered identification. Was Pratt behind this clean-up? Without pausing at the desk, he headed for Anne's room. There he tapped.

"That you, Knife River?" came from the other side of the panel.

"Open up, sis." He mimicked Anne's brother.

She snapped at the bait. Her face froze when she saw him, but his boot kept her from slamming the door. Then she got a good look at his face, and she slowly retreated, no longer blocking his entrance.

"What is it, Tex?" She knew that this was no time to quarrel.

Baylor told her, very briefly. He concluded, "Knife River didn't do it. I can prove he didn't, provided I get a free hand. He's hiding at Tío Pepe's place, up the river," Baylor reddened. "You know all about that, I reckon."

Anne blinked, but could not keep the tears back. "You two are going to be owl hooters if you can't clear him! He ought to surrender. They don't lynch people in a town this large. You're always against the law."

Baylor had no time to argue. "Listen, honey. You got that note, telling about him being a prisoner?"

"Why?"

"Get it if you got it."

She dug it out of a dresser. She had kept it. Baylor guessed that she had done so to help keep her wrath at fever heat. As she handed him the crumpled note, he dug a paper out of his vest: the note Jeb Garvey had received about Maureen.

"Look! Different hand writings. Another thing, Lafe didn't know Knife River was a prisoner. He looked kind of amazed, over there in Zaragoza, when the mayor brought him out along with Maureen."

"What do you mean?"

"That note you got was a Marcia Hitchings put up job to make you hostile. See? Lafe's men'd know, the mayor'd know, but Lafe'd not worry about little details."

"But I saw you and Marcia!"

"Listen, honey—" She drew back as he tried to take her in his arms. "All right, think yore thoughts. Me, I got business to tend to."

"Tex, I'd like to believe it," she faltered. "Lord, I would!"

"Don't you see, I *had* to make a play for her? To try to find out where Knife River and Maureen was locked up, and to get solid with Rusty."

She didn't know what to say. He went on, voice rising, "That cheap little tramp! I don't care a hoot for her. Never did."

"You mean that?"

He took her in his arms, and this time she did not draw away. When

he headed for the hall, she cried, "Tex, be careful!"

Baylor, hurrying toward the stairs, did not notice the woman

Knife River's mount staggered, pitched in a heap, throwing both of them.

who venomously eyed him through the crack of the door of the room adjoining Anne's.

HE FOUND Hitchings at the Exchange Bar. He demanded, "Rusty, where's Lafe Singer? Jeb Garvey's dead, an' I got to string along now. I'm out on a limb."

That opened Rusty's eyes. "Whut happened tuh Jeb?"

"Knife River's guns. Is Lafe in in Ysleta?"

Rusty nodded. Before he could ask particulars, Baylor went on, "You ride out and tell Lafe how

things stand. He'll believe you when you argue with him about me having a change of heart. Here's the idea. I got to stick with Knife River. Have to light a shuck, quick as the news leaks out about Jeb, and a posse gets going."

"Uh—what?" Rusty was blinking.

"Knife River's my pardner, right or wrong, and I got to go with him, if he's suspected. I'm giving you and Lafe the Casino at your own figure. We'll raid Pratt's herd. If I have to dust out afore we kin sell the critters, hell, I'll trust you fellers to cut me in proper for my share. We got till tonight or tomorrow, I reckon, afore we got to hit him. An' I allow I got that much time."

"So yo're clearing out? Me and Lafe to take over—but whut about Jeb's interests?"

"You arrange a meeting with Singer, calm him down so I can face him in Ysleta without leather slapping. I got what'll make him sweet." Baylor tapped his chest. "A lot of information on *all* Jeb's interests."

"Gosh, Tex." Rusty was awed. He had already stepped into the dead giant's shoes.

"Keep yore mouth laced up. Fer Gawd's sake, don't tell Marcia a word. You know how wimmin are."

Rusty headed for the rack. Baylor knew what was going on in his mind: a chance to hog it all, and to hell with childish notions about how to deal with the Sierra Blanca squatters, whose ranges were to hide the cattle until rebranded for marketing.

Tex, killing time to give his advance agent a chance, wondered just what the ranger sergeant's real purpose in town was, and if Pratt could have reached from New Mexico to Texas to stir things up . . . an uneasy thought. . . .

Despite the risk of appearing in public, he could not stay in one place. In the next bar he picked up news that took his breath. A telegraphic dispatch had just hit town: the President had appointed a new governor in New Mexico!

That whirled in Tex's brain. A new regime; a chance to get his day in court; perhaps a general amnesty to give all participants of the cattle wars a chance to turn over a new leaf. If so, all the more reason for avenging his father on Texan soil!

LATER, he headed for Ysleta. He felt the rustling wings of destiny. Too many things had happened in too short a time. It could not help but point to one thing: the showdown. He was more than a little awed as he approached the town.

Once in Ysleta, he kept a wary eye open for Pratt's men, who might by now have driven the herd across the river. A hell of a business, all around, Jeb dealing with Pratt, protecting Pratt's enemy, and for a while, wavering on the edge of raiding the man with whom he traded.

Rusty Hitchings was at the appointed bar. He said, "Singer's in the back room, waitin'. Flag of truce is correct, he says. C'mon."

Baylor followed Rusty to the back room. Singer, head bandaged, grinned crookedly. "I see yuh finally got some hoss sense, huh? But it's shore tough, pore Jeb git-

tin' dry gulched by Knife River."

A waiter came in with a bottle and glasses. When he left, Baylor tossed his bombshell. "Warn't Knife River, a-tall. Lookit these here documents, and listen to me."

"Why—damn it—Rusty said it was!"

"Don't make no difference," persisted Baylor, laying the sheaf of papers and the Spanish coin on the table. "I had to give him a plausible story to make him fix up this meeting, which I couldn't fix, not after Zaragoza."

"Who did kill him?" Singer demanded. "That shore hurt our plans."

"Rusty's pardner, Wall Eye Barnes," said Baylor.

"Yo're crazy!" Rusty backed away, warily watching both men.

"Listen," began Baylor. And he gave them the details, bit by bit, explaining from the very beginning. He concluded, "Rusty, you had a spy in your outfit. A snake in the grass that was posting Pratt, so he come down south to take a pussonal hand. Jest like Lafe had a fool amongst his men."

"Whut you mean?" demanded Singer.

"Marcia Hitchings," grinned Baylor, "jest happened to be in my house when Anne Morell jest happened in, with a note claiming you was holding her brother caged up to make me stand to heel. Me, I learned you didn't even know Knife River was alive, that night in Zaragoza.

"Rusty's sister faked that note so Anne'd come to see me, and git hostile when she seen I had company. And—shut up, Rusty, I'm talking! And one of your men, Lafe, must of babbled to Marcia."

"That tramp, Sawbuck Smith!" flared Rusty.

Baylor grinned. "Each kin see dirt on the other fellow's doorstep. Jest like I was aiming to prove. 'Nother words, Rusty, your traitor's the one I want. I want Wall Eye Barnes so I kin turn him over to the law, and clear Knife River."

"You go to hell!" flared Rusty. "Mebbe he was a spy for Pratt, but how do I know he told him about this yere raid we plans?"

"Rusty," said Singer, voice like a blade on a whetstone, "you git that dirty, lousy son of a coyote of a Wall Eye fer Baylor to handle, or so help me Gawd, I'll take it outen yore hide. I ain't lighting a shuck, like Baylor. I'm staying, and yo'd better not rile me."

Baylor's heart was singing. It had worked to the last turn! Squawking to the law would have given Wall Eye a chance of escape; this way, Tex was sure of getting him into the marshal's hands. "All right, I'll fix it," said Rusty. "I'll get him."

"Like hell yuh will," sneered Singer. "Yo're staying right here, whar we kin watch yuh. One of my men's going."

Rusty snarled at Baylor, "Yuh dirty, slick tongued—!"

THE insult was wasted. Baylor's ears were full of the drumming of fate's wings. This was the start; and then Pratt, gunned out, or trampled under his stampeding herd.

Singer started to the front, but he never quite reached the door. It burst open, smashing him in the

face; it swept him backward, half stunned. Wall Eye Barnes bounded in, guns drawn. At his heels towered a tall, burly man with steel cold eyes and an iron laugh.

Conway Pratt had come with his spy, and he came a-shooting! But it was Wall Eye who had first innings. He snarled, "Rusty, you lousy skunk, you—"

The apparition of the man he had just sold to Baylor shocked Rusty Hitchings. A split second was lost in his dive for his pistols. And that was more than enough. Flame laced the sulphurous gunsmoke. Rusty reeled, his hoglegs blazing as he dropped.

For one terrible instant, Baylor wondered if fate had betrayed him; then his instinctive draw and cat-quick sidestep, and the roar and thunder of his Colts told him he was answering Pratt's cross fire. He felt the stab of lead, the hammer blow of a hit. But his guns danced, following Pratt as he sagged.

His heavy bdy jerked from Baylor's .45s as he crumpled to the floor.

Singer, still dazed and blinded by the tears drawn by the door's edge hitting him between the eyes, was firing wildly. Treacherous at heart, his first thought was that he had been betrayed, and every man was his enemy.

Tex flung himself clear, dropped an emptied gun, tossed the loaded Colt from his wounded left to his uninjured right. During the split second shift, he yelled, "Lafe, you fool, cut it out!"

Singer could not hear, or wouldn't believe. But Baylor had no chance to fire in self defense. A gun blazed from the door, catching Lafe in the shoulder and hammering him into a corner.

"Drop it, or I'll bore you!" The newcomer swung, facing Baylor, whose blood splotched gunbutt had slipped in the shift. Behind him was another man, shotgun leveled. "The law!"

Bone-handled smoke poles, and the face Dallas Hardin had described. Sergeant McIntyre, and another ranger! Baylor's weapon dropped. He reeled dizzily, realized he was no more than raked.

"Don't know how you fit into this, Baylor," grumbled McIntyre. "If Pratt hadn't been in sech a hurry, he might be alive."

"You looked fer him," groped Tex, "account of cattle?"

"Mebbe so," evaded the sergeant. "Now, you and these jaspers?"

"Rusty Hitchings, opened by mistake," said Baylor. "And that there t'rantler is Wall Eye Barnes, Pratt's spy. I was aiming to get him for murderin' Jeb Garvey."

"What's that?" McIntyre cut in. "Garvey?"

"Look at them papers on the table," challenged Baylor, "and listen."

McIntyre's companion was going through Wall Eye's pockets. He looked up and said, "Story checks. Lookit this yere Spanish gold."

He brought out a new poke, filled with coins stamped with the arms of Charles IV of Spain. Baylor sighed. This was a break he had not anticipated, catching the murderer with the damning loot. He said, "Jeb usta say that that old

dinero was the safest to keep in his house, account it being hard to pass . . . it'd make a thief nail hisself. Pore Jeb never reckoned it'd work out this well."

LATER, he rode from Ysleta. His work was done. The new governor, and the coming amnesty in New Mexico justified his father's faith. Now that the show was over, Baylor shivered, thinking of how close he had come to lawlessness in seeking vengeance. Fate was funny.

"Spanish gold," he muttered, forgetting the ache of his superficial wounds. "Jest an example, I guess." Somehow, the words made him think of Irina. "Spanish, and all gold."

His new found comfort of spirit left him. He sighed, shook his head, and felt vaguely disturbed. He remembered those months of flight from home, that deadly night in Zaragoza. He'd take care of Irina, of course.

Baylor avoided the lights of El Paso. The casino, his legal property, did not enter his mind. It whirled with too many other thoughts.

"I kin see Anne standing fer me taking care of Irina till she's married off to some nice Mexican feller!" he told himself, grinning sourly.

The clean sweep at Ysleta had upset a lot of convictions. He began to resent the idea of Irina belonging to anyone, Mexican or otherwise. A clean sweep, huh? He said aloud, "I'll marry that gal myself! One mo' move, and Knife River's a pardner, stead of a brother-in-law subject tuh my evil influence!"

He spurred his horse to a gallop. Funny how long it takes a gent to see what's what!

There were lights in Tío Pepe's house among the cottonwoods.

Irina was waiting in the shadows outside. Baylor dismounted, had her in his arms before she could say what was on her lips. Finally she contrived, "*Querido,* I have been so worried. If I had known where to go, I would have followed again."

"Shore yuh would, honey," he said, drawing her closer, kissing her as he had never before. "From now on, yo're tracking along, all the time. Afore I explain a dang thing, let's get this settled—we're going to New Mexico. Jest you and me. To our home."

"Tex—are you crazy—*sanctísima madre—*" she gasped, wide eyed.

"Not quite," he assured her. "Wait till I tell you. But first, I got to let Knife River know he's square with the law. And kind of explain to Anne why I'm spending the rest of the evenin' kissin' you plumb dizzy."

"Oh . . . I am so glad," she sighed. "I was afraid I would have the bad news. You are not fool me, Tex?"

"Fool you? Silly! Whut bad news?" He drew back, keeping an anxious grip on her arm. "Bad news?"

Sí. Anne, she leave weeth her brother. To New Mexico. Instead of the surrender to the police in El Paso, she have the bright idea. You are the fugitive, not Knife Reever. Eees no price on his head."

So simple he had never thought of it!

"Knife Reever left the note. Wait, I weel get it—"

"*Spere poco!*" He caught a double armful, squeezed her lithe waist until she gasped. "Later, mebbe. Right now, I got no time fer pardners that's settin' well in the saddle."

Irina wondered what he meant when he said that Spanish gold had brought him luck. But she never bothered to ask him. Loving an *Americano* was ever so much easier than trying to understand one. . . .

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LOVE'S

DEACON WALLACE, methodically spitting tobacco juice at the cockroaches that paraded in the dingy lobby of the Silver Star Hotel, lifted watery eyes to size up the lovely guest, as she descended from the second floor.

Win Ferris was shapely, and the chestnut hair that escaped the confinement of her close fitting, pert little hat was becoming a gilded halo as the sun's slanting rays leveled off through fly-specked windows. An eastern schoolm'am, Deacon decided, sort of lent a touch of beauty to Bear Wallow. She looked right smart, with that neat traveling suit, and sensible little shoes, and trim ankles whose sleek silk hosiery was not too thin. He bit off a fresh chew and greeted, "Make yoreself right to home, m'am. There's the El Paso paper jest got here this mawnin'. Yuh shore showed good sense, gittin' here a couple weeks afore school opens."

Win smiled, and her blue eyes seconded it, "I thought I'd better allow myself a while to get used to my new home."

"Home? Shore nice tuh hear yuh put it thattaway. Most of 'em jest figgers they'll stay here till they gits a better job, round Fort Worth or Houston. Now, yuh bet-

She couldn't help loving him, even though every move he made convinced her more surely that he was the leader of the outlaws of Bear Wallow

ter trot out yore party dress Sat tiday night—they's a dance in the loft over Sim Higgin's genrul store, and all the young bucks fer miles around is going tuh be proud tuh meet yuh."

"I'm sure I'll like it," she assured him.

BUT inside, she was not as certain. Spying, even to trap a ring of cattle thieves, was not pleasant. She wondered how long she could keep up her pretense of being an eastern schoolm'am. She had to watch herself, every moment; every moment until she collected enough evidence to convict Glenn Haley, suspected head of the outlaws.

"Nice name," she reflected, deftly touching a powder puff to the tiptilted, impudent little nose that made one just a bit oblivious of the firmness of her chin and generous red mouth. "Too bad he's a crook."

At least, she consoled herself, she was not a spy for pay. It was an unpleasant duty; her father, up in Waco, was a member of the Cat-

Waving the blood-spattered cloth, she raced toward the remuda!

RENEGADE

tlemen's Association in whose behalf she had come to Bear Wallow.

A JINGLE of spurs started her from the musing that followed Deacon's well meant chatter. She looked up at a hawkish, devil-may-care face whose every line was accented by alkali dust.

He was not exactly handsome; his face was too strong, and his hazel eyes were wary and bitter as his tight, broad mouth. He wore levis; a leather vest which was plain and unadorned as his high-heeled boots—expensive boots. Win's father never wore better.

He reminded her of a bird of prey ready to strike. Despite the rolling gait of one seldom out of the saddle, he had the poise and alertness of a highly bred horse, the litheness of a mountain lion, and his long, supple hands seemed endowed with a separate life, ready at any instant to draw those low-hung .45s, blazing as they cleared their holsters.

For a moment their eyes met in mutual scrutiny. Win's pulse quickened as his expression changed from wariness to genuine admiration. But he did not speak; he merely doffed his broad-brimmed, dusty hat, then at a stride reached the desk.

"Deacon—" His voice was guarded. "Any news?"

The proprietor-clerk shook his grizzled head. "Nuthin' a-tall." Then he brightened, gestured toward Win. " 'Ceptin' the new school m'am's got here. Miss Ferris, I'd shore admire fer to interduce Mistah Haley—we calls him Gallopin Glenn fer short—the boss of the Diamond Double B."

"How do you do, Mr. Haley?" the school m'am acknowledged in what she hoped was a convincing eastern manner.

"I'm mighty proud tuh welcome yuh to Bear Wallow, m'am," returned Haley. He had a nice smile that for a moment displayed white teeth; for a moment the hawk became boyish, amiable, downright good looking; but in those watchful hazel eyes she caught scrutiny that missed nothing. "I hope you're aiming to be at the dance day after tomorrow night?"

"Thank you. I'll be looking forward to it." She was all smiles and brightness; and that expression lingered until his broad shoulders blocked the door. Then she watched him mount a Roman-nosed pinto that had the eye of a fiend. But the beast knew better than to cut up!

Win knew horses, and knew what kind of man it took to handle that four-legged devil. Her eyes became somber, and she hated her task. Why couldn't a fellow like Glenn Haley find life a gallant, honest adventure?

"But he did like me," she told herself. She was too straight-forward to deny the thought; nor the one that followed . . . maybe he'd like her enough to quit his lawless ways.

HER small smile was bitter, a moment later. She knew this hard land of her birth; you reformed men with hot lead, or a rawhide necktie hitched to the limb of some oak tall enough to dangle buzzard bait. That was the law. A stern law, but lacking it, honest cattlemen like her father could not live.

She shuddered, thinking of the buzzards clawing at those fearless hazel eyes. Deacon piped, "M'am, don't look like you think too much of Glenn, hey?"

She forced a laugh. "Oh, quite the contrary. I was just wondering how I'd fit out here in your country. I want to belong, you know."

Win lithely emerged from the uncomfortable chair, picked up her handbag, and set out for the express office to inquire about her trunk. The short-barreled .38 holstered at her knee was a necessary nuisance she had not dared trust to her suitcase; the kindly inquisitive Mexican maid, Paca, would not lose a moment in inspecting the eastern *senorita's* lacy negligee . . . and a sawed-off Colt was not the usual equipment for a schoolm'am—

But a spy must always be ready. Thieves who violated the honest code of the country would not spare a woman. . . . And Glenn Haley, it seemed, depended on Deacon for "news!" Careful, Win!

THE day before the big dance found Win with her wardrobe all spread out. Finally she made her choice, a gown of blue to match the color of her eyes. Its simplicity suited Bear Wallow, yet it would coyly accentuate the gracious curves that peeped past the edges of the dress as she held it in front of her, testing its allure in the cracked cheval glass that was the pride of the hotel.

Her mirrored smile faded, and a small frown puckered her finely arched brow. "Bait . . . to trap a crook. . . ." She was too honest at heart to relish her role. "But I mustn't think of him."

She donned her beige ensemble and went out to walk, now that the heat of the afternoon was being swallowed by the approach of evening. The ruddy glow that was kissing the squat Mexican adobes gave Bear Wallow almost a touch of glamor, and the Spanish voice, singing *La Golondrina* to the tinkle of a guitar thrilled Win, then suddenly made her sigh. At times the town seemed to shed its stark ugliness.

She hurried to pass the good-humored rowdiness that bellowed from the Thirst Coffin Saloon. A schoolm'am would; though Win did not mind the high-hearted mirth of honest cowpunchers. They were her own people. And as she strolled, she noted the brands on horses at the hitching rack; Flying W, and the Bar-M-Bar men were raising all the hell, it seemed. A buckboard, loaded with supplies, was in front of the false front General Store; Diamond Double B horses.

Glenn Haley was back in town for groceries. Her heart speeded up. She wondered if she'd see him. She paused to peer through the grimy windows of Manuel Gomez's harness shop, where the finest saddle gear in Jeff Davis County was made by hand.

Good-humored song and jest suddenly congealed into bitter oaths, the spatter of breaking glass. Then a deadly instant of silence froze the adjoining Thirst Coffin. Win's breath stopped; she knew the signs. The roar of a .45, an answering blast, the splintering

of woodwork confirmed her premonition.

But the battle did not end swiftly as many do. Out of the wrathful babel of voices she caught words, and pieced them together. Her face whitened. Glen Haley and his men must be alive, yet hard pressed.

"Watch it, Clubfoot—" A savage roaring exchange of .45s blotted some. "Yuh kain't rush them damn' thieves—stop it, Shorty—keep away from them stairs—shore I'll git 'em—whar's the marshal—?" The double boom of a ten gauge shotgun. Then, "Shake a hock tuh the back door—smoke 'em out from the back—"

She pictured two, maybe three men, firing as they retreated; retreated into an ambush on the second floor of the saloon building. Someone must have accused Haley and his men. They would be riddled, torn with .45s and buckshot. They—no, *he* would! No one else counted.

Marshal Gregg, eyes blazing, shaggy white head thrust forward, came down the street, dragging one lame leg, but moving swiftly, a drawn Colt in each hand. A deputy followed with a sawed off shotgun.

"Git out, Mis' Win!" he howled. "Yuh'll git kilt!" This as he ducked behind a rain water barrel, and his deputy poured buckshot to follow the marshal's .45 slugs into the second floor window.

She ran, but not back. Wild shots smacked past her, zinged from the tile roof across the street. She bounded toward the Diamond Double B buckboard, seized the reins, for a moment fought the plunging, snorting mustangs. Then she whipped them clear of the flying bullets, and drove the wagon down the narrow alley that skirted the saloon. She had not misjudged the yells of the wrathful lawmen and citizens.

"Oh, God, what a fool I am!" she accused herself as she jammed the screeching brake, and waved to the two men flashing past a second floor window. White-faced, she prayed during that awful instant when fire from the further end of the building boomed into the hall. She saw the pursuers; heard the answering shots of the fugitives. "Lord—good Lord—"

THEN two men appeared on the roof, silhouetted against the evening glow. Desperate, hard pressed men, ready to dive into the street, make a hopeless dash for life.

"Jump!" she shrieked. The hell roar of battle subsided an instant, while the besiegers prepared for the final charge toward the trap door leading to the roof. "Jump—hurry—!"

Neither of the two wounded men who dropped to the sacks of flour and sugar and salt in the wagon bed was Glenn Haley; but she could not let them down, or pause for questions.

Dust covered their flight. Soon they were beyond the town and the murderous rattle of pistols. Whether there would be pursuit or not, she did not know. She glanced back at the two grimy, wounded men.

"Where's Haley? Did they get him—?"

"Shucks, no! If he'd been with us, we'd of cleaned them out. Me, I'm Whitey Whipple." He

Then they had jumped to the wagon and the horses were at full gallop.

grinned, brushed back his tow-colored hair, jerked a thumb at the lean fellow who fumbled fresh shells into an emptied six gun. "And that lanky galoot is Slim Barlow."

"Don't worry, m'am," Slim cut in. "We ain't shot up much. And they won't foller us. It was self defense. The marshal was trying tuh restore order. Ain't more'n two of them skunks killed nohow."

Win suddenly felt sick and faint. "For heaven's sake, take the horses."

She scrambled back to the heap of provisions, pulled herself together, helped Slim staunch a wounded shoulder. Whitey took the reins and went on, "Our boss ain't

poplar around here, an' a couple gunslicks from outa town tried tuh git us dead tuh rights in a brawl. They didn't live tuh do any repentin'. But it gives us a dang bad name, wuss'n we got already. Which we don't deserve. And I'm powerful sorry, takin' yuh outa yore way, but we kain't drive back tuhnight. Looks like Diamond Double B cowpokes jest ain't welcome in town."

"Please don't worry!" Win laughed shakily; and again her pulse quickened, this time for another reason.

This was a perfect chance to spy on Glenn Haley; he'd never suspect her now. No amount of clever planning could have matched this fluke of fate. She told herself it was silly, being sentimental about a suspected cattle thief.

TWO hours later, the bullet-raked men and horses reached the weather-beaten ranch house sheltered by towering cottonwoods. Cowpunchers burst from the yellow glow of the bunk houses. Their shouts of query and wrath brought Glenn Haley from the main building. At his heels came a bent, gnarled old man, and a lovely girl whose black hair gleamed in the lantern light; she had warm olive skin, and great dark eyes, and her flimsy calico dress revealed a slim, shapely figure.

After them waddled a plump Mexican woman, who caught up with the old man. In the confusion, the cross fire of query and answer, Win learned that the three who trailed Haley were the ranch cook, his wife, and his daughter, Dolores.

And Win's heart froze when the sweet-faced brunette's troubled eyes turned up to Haley's grim face, and her slim hands clung to his arm as she demanded, "Oh—Glenn—will they arrest you—?"

Haley was too busy to answer, but he did not thrust her aside. After hearing from Slim and Whitey, he added his thanks to the greeting he had offered Win. Then he said, "M'am, I'm shore sorry. But I can't send yuh back tonight. Doubt even if I kin risk sending a man with you tomorrow."

Dolores' black eyes blazed into Win's for an instant, then the half-Spanish beauty sweetly said, "I can drive her back. They weel not harm a woman, those people in Bear Wallow."

"Is it so dangerous?" Win forced a light laugh.

Haley nodded as he turned with her toward the ranch house. His hazel eyes were like cold flame. "It shore is. This here is the fust sign. Framing a fight. Trying tuh starve us out. We kain't get supplies from Bear Wallow no more; that's purty plain. Only other town is Poison Well, a hundred miles northwest, and so full of owl hooters it'd take an army tuh keep 'em from robbing a tramp of a dirty shirt."

Win's resolution wavered. He rang true. Unjust suspicion was making Glenn Haley the scapegoat for the real criminals. Or was that just a plausible story?

"If they're that tough—" She shivered, thoroughly eastern schoolm'am. "I'd be afraid to have . . ." A sweet, very sweet smile toward the lovely brunette. "Miss—"

"Dolores McCarthy," the girl cut in.

Win caught Haley's flash of annoyance at the cook's daughter's continued presence. That could mean only one thing: Dolores liked Haley a little too well. But Haley, Win sensed from the admiration that blossomed in his eyes, liked eastern schoolm'ams—this one at least. And it was not just gratitude either. Still, her thrill and gladness were laced with bitterness. Dolores *was* beautiful.

Well, at least she wasn't his wife. Not yet. . . .

"I'd be afraid," repeated Win.

"Yo're right." He grimaced. "Them dirty sidewinders—honest, I don't know jest who is back of it all. 'Tain't the marshal, I'm purty nigh certain, and 'tain't the cattlemen around here, though they don't like me too much. But they'd bushwhack a lady jest as quick as they would me, whoever they are. Skunks is skunks, wherever yuh find 'em, no matter whut yuh may have heard back east about this here country."

That was no news to Win, but she registered surprise.

"Mebbe in a couple days," he muttered.

"Oh, Mr. Haley—"

"Glenn, fer short," he corrected.

"I'd love to stay here a few days. School won't open for another two weeks, and I know Mrs. McCarthy and her daughter won't mind. I promise I won't be a nuisance." Her bewitching smile included the group; she knew she was making progress with Haley, and she hated it. But Win tried to tell herself that she'd be doing her duty just as well if she could prove Haley innocent.

"I reckon yuh should stay," Haley agreed. "Yore taking the part of my boys is bound tuh get yuh some ill will. I feel like a danged reprobate, too. Likely tuh cost yuh yore job school-teaching."

"I don't care!" she laughed.

AND then fat, pleasant Mrs. McCarthy showed Win to a long unused room. Later, she joined Slim and Whitey for a belated supper. The two cowpunchers, though lame and bandaged, were in high spirits, except for the fact that their inability to ride for the next week or so would seriously cripple the activities of the ranch.

"An' it's shore tough, m'am," grumbled Whitey. "We been losin' our share of cow critters. Which is why I came up shootin' when that t'rantler in the saloon called us cattle-thieving polecats, and edged Slim from the free lunch counter."

But it was Slim who showed real tact. "Don't pay no attention tuh that Dolores, m'am," he assured, building a smoke. "She was raised on this spread, and when Glenn bought it, coming three years ago, next fall, she sorta lowed she liked him as well as the ranch, but he ain't more'n nice and friendly tuh her, like he is tuh everyone, excepting folks he's got tuh shoot the gizzards out of."

"So you all like him?"

"Shore we does," declared Shorty. "All of us barring the McCarthy's follered him from Houston."

That night, Win was thinking instead of sleeping. Haley's following of cowpokes hinted that he must be a crook, running a close-knit little band of thieves. Or were

the old time McCarthys tricking him, selling him to his enemies?

The following day, Win told Haley that she'd be ever so grateful if he could saddle up a really gentle horse. "I used to ride, back home," she concluded. "And I'd love to mount a mustang. I mean, a fairly tame one. And go out across your range."

Haley eyed her sharply, then grinned and told Bud Logan, one of the uninjured cowpunchers, to saddle up old Baldy. Win felt that they both were eyeing her as she emerged from the house, wearing a riding habit borrowed from Dolores.

"Yuh git on the left side, m'am," drawled Haley, as she tried to act a bit dubious in approaching the mustang.

Too late, she realized Haley's cunning. Stung by his remark, she disdained his aid, and mounted up easily, unhampered by high pommel and cantle—both of which were utterly different from anything a dude ever forked!

Haley was too business-like to offer to accompany her. Baldy was gentle, mainly due to every infirmity an old cow pony can acquire. Haley, she reflected, hadn't shot the decripit beast, or turned him out to become buzzard rations. That made her task harder.

Baldy proved to be better than he looked; oats and rest had helped him. Win, judiciously letting him out a bit, saw that she could cover a good deal of the Diamond Double B spread without remaining away suspiciously long.

Haley would not turn an old horse out to die; so he wouldn't murder a woman spy. But she shivered at the thought of facing those hawkish, hazel eyes. She wondered how they'd look at a woman he was kissing. . . .

For a moment a speculative little smile brightened her mouth. But before she had a chance to recapture her straying fancy, she emerged from an arroyo, just in time to see three white-faced steers wheel from a water hole. They were Haley's critters, nice, plump beef.

THEN Win's heart stopped. She knew an altered brand when she saw it; no inspector could have spotted it sooner, and many would have missed it. Clever work. In another week or so, only close scrutiny would have exposed the trick.

But here it was: Rafter HP had been changed to Diamond Double B! Haley, cattle thief, had made good use of the brand he had bought with the spread; and talent like his could work miracles with almost anyone's mark.

Old Baldy whinnied. His ears pricked up when he saw the critters. The gallant old fellow knew a real rider was on his back, and he was ready for action. That touched Win, deeply. She blinked, sighed, and then her mouth tightened. But for Haley's redeeming soft spot, Baldy would have been coyote food.

"Oh, damn law and order!" she choked. "Love's a renegade—so am I!"

She hitched up her skirt, drew the deadly snub-nosed .38, and spurred Baldy to action. For a short dash, he would do.

It was hard shooting with that sawed-off gun, which was made

only for close work; but Win's father had taught her the tricks. The steer tumbled in his tracks. The other two bawled, kicked up their heels, tore out across the rolling spread. But Baldy's old blood was running fast again, and his stout heart urged him on.

The second . . . and the third dropped. She dismounted, took a light knife from the saddle bag, and while it was not heavy enough for the task, she dug in. Soon she had peeled off a damning square of hide. And presently, the third gory scrap of evidence was removed. In the hands of the law, it would doom Haley; in her hands, it might save him. If he'd only listen to her, let her convince him that he could not keep it up, altering brands. Since she had detected the trick, others might.

"That'll take the conceit out of him!" she flared.

THEN she started. From some distance behind her came the tinkle of a curb chain; but the drawling, soft voice was at her side.

"Fer a schoolm'am, yuh shore are handy with a skinning knife," Haley said as she sprang from her knees, pistol in hand. "Uhuh. I sorta knowed yuh was a spy, Miss Winifred."

"I'm not!" Her voice cracked. "I—you followed me, spying!"

"Shore, shore I did." He shrugged. "I seen that pistol sort of spoiling the fit of yore skirt, there in the hotel. Didn't jest look right. And yuh givin' Slim an' Whitey a lift—didn't add up, m'am. So I follered yuh, jest in case. Now, drop that smoke-pole miss. I ain't hurtin' women. Ain't even ever shot a sheriff."

"I bet you never did!" she blazed, angry at the sob she had barely swallowed. "Oh, you fool, you can't keep it up! Look—" She gestured at the altered brands. "I caught on. Others will—"

His strong young face became very old and tired. He slowly said, "Give a dog a bad name. Which I did usta run with a wild crowd. Getting hunk with the English syndicates that was making life rotten fer honest cowmen, using gun-slingers tuh run us out of our rights.

"But me, I was half way quick with a hawg leg. Shore, it was self defense. Only, it sorta woke me up. All the cattle kings' men wasn't perfessional gun-slingers. The one I shot was jest another cowpoke like myself. So I quit fer keeps. No warrants out for me. But I got a bad name, and the whole district here suspects me. Like you do."

"Oh—Glenn—" The pistol dropped from her hands to the gory squares of steer's hide. She looked up, eyes gleaming. "I wish—"

He smiled. There was no wrath in him. He knew already, beyond any doubt, that she had come to turn him in to the Cattlemen's Association. He knew that she hated her duty, but he was not asking her to shirk it.

"Go ahead, Win. Take them hides. Yuh kin make a case. I kain't prove I didn't use a running iron on them critters of Hob Pearson's. I done too much work jest like that, when I was a smart aleck kid, only I done it mebbe a bit better'n that.

And that day I saw you in the hotel, I was coming to ask old Deacon if the town was getting more against me, or if I was holding my own."

"Glenn—" She tiptoed, her hands reaching over his broad shoulders. "I can't—I won't—I'll help you—I believe you—"

But for a moment he could not quite believe her. Then he understood the gleam in her eyes, and his strong arms drew her toward him. Alkali dust flavored that long, fierce kiss, but it was sweet dust. She tried to protest, but he held her too close. . . .

"Honey," he muttered, catching his breath and letting her settle back on her high heels, "yo're the first person, man or woman, that's believed in me. If yuh mean it—I'll fight tuh prove myself tuh Bear Wallow. I'll take these hides tuh the sheriff—"

"No, not yet—please," she pleaded. "Wait—they'll dry-gulch you, now. Let things cool down. Destroy the evidence."

"Mebbe yo're right," he allowed, thrusting the squares of hide into his saddle bags. "Now, yuh ride tuh the house, easy like, by yoreself. This is between us two, ain't it, honey?"

SHE tried to be cool and impersonal as she slowly rode back to the ranch house, but it was difficult. Yet she knew that Haley's story could be true; that a ring of thieves might be casting suspicion on him in order to deflect suspicion from themselves. Hob Pearson, for instance, might have altered brands on his own cattle, to frame Haley.

Dolores McCarthy avoided her, and the girl's mother fussed with imaginary duties about the ranch house. Win, certain that they had intuitively sensed her new attitude toward the boss, was glad to keep to herself. And that evening, right after supper, she went to her room to think it out.

The lover's moon that silvered all that rolling plain was wasted. The subdued wrangling and horseplay of the cowpunchers in the bunk house combined with her weariness of body and soul to lull her to troubled sleep. She half heard them as she restlessly, half consciously stirred, shifting her pillow. She was scarcely aware of the time, and that the masculine voices now were nearer, more wrathful; that Haley was taking part in the exchange. . . .

To her sleep-fogged fancy, it began to seem that he was reviling her, once more damning her as a spy. The snarl and thump below scarcely registered. It was the silence, finally, that conspired with her troubled mind to awaken Win.

Suddenly, her wide eyes blinked at the moonlight. The position of the silvered patch on the clean, worn floor told her that hours had passed. Something warned her that danger was near, but she could not define it; it was no more than a vague, compelling u n e a s e, a thumping heart that frightened itself to a giddier beat. Intuitively, she knew that it was not physical peril that hovered, but something worse. Yet, though she was now so wide awake, she moved almost like a sleep walker, wriggled her toes into a pair of beaded moccasins, drew a blanket about her borrowed

With the broken bottle she slashed his snickering face.

nightgown, and slipped down the hall. She gripped her pistol, just in case.

But once on the ground floor, Win learned that this was no occasion for weapons; though for an instant, she barely restrained her wrath.

HALEY sat in the living room, head wearily supported by the strong hands that half hid his face. Dolores was beside him. The embers in the grate brought warm lights from her black hair, kissed the sweetly rounded arm that twined over Haley's shoulder.

"Darling," she fondly murmured, "don't worry—I'll stick by you—"

So he'd told his sweetheart a spy had trapped him! No other thought could have made any man so disconsolate in the affectionate presence of such a lovely girl. "That's mighty sweet of you, honey—"

Win's blood now boiled. Damn him, he'd called her honey, that afternoon, fed her that pathetic, cunning line! And when Dolores fairly poured herself over Haley, Win's wrath became too cold for words; just one glimpse of him stroking that *mestiza's* silky hair, and Win retreated.

Things looked different, entirely different. She could no longer understand how she had swerved from her duty. Penitence kept her from feeling the full stab of humiliation at seeing Haley welcome Dolores' sympathy and consolation.

She hastily dressed. It was late. The cowpunchers were snoring in the bunk house. She could saddle a horse and slip out, unobserved, while Haley was engrossed with that lovely creature. No chance to find those damning scraps of steer's hide; probably he had already destroyed them. But somewhere on the Diamond Double B spread there must be other cattle with altered brands.

Presently she was in the stable, feverishly saddling a pinto. Ride to Bear Wallow, report to the authorities, so that they could make a surprise raid.

HASTE and wrath made her unwary. Too late, she sensed that eyes were probing the gloom of the stable; she felt their stab, caught the faint odor of tobacco. But Win had not a chance. Her outcry and her instinctive gesture toward her gun were both smothered in a horse blanket whose odorous folds were supplemented by strong, wiry arms.

There were two men, but they moved soundlessly, save for muttered oaths as they wrestled with her kicking legs and futilely writhing arms. Half stifled, she felt them lashing her athwart a horse.

Her moment of terror became vain, burning rage. That treacherous, smiling whelp had kissed her out of her senses, taken counsel with his brunette sweetheart—and here she was, trapped to keep her from making her report.

But the fact that the horse's hoofs were muffled sent a cold fear racing through her. He might be sentimental about old Baldy, but not about a woman. Death by moonlight . . . and no one but one trusted companion in crime would ever know what cairn of rocks kept the buzzards from betraying the presence of a spy's body . . . Dad had warned her of the peril. . . .

Win was half suffocated when her captors halted, removed the blanket, and set her astride the horse. As they bound her hands, she saw the two were strangers. One was a squint-eyed, leering little fellow; the other, whom the runt addressed as Gorman, was tall as Haley, but heavier, with a rugged, evil face whose deep lines were accented by the moonlight.

"Yuh needn't get scairt, yet," Gorman grinned. "Yo're jest going with us tuh make that pigheaded Haley realize he kain't go back on his old pardner, eh, Marlin?"

"Yo're a sight purtier than that black-haired gal he's been throwin' rocks at," cackled Marlin, his squint eyes appraising Win's moon-silvered loveliness. "I'm a hopin' he don't dicker with Gorman."

Win regarded them defiantly, but she had already died inside; she had nothing to expect but the worst. They knew that Haley cared for her, else they would have seized Dolores! It must have been some sudden blow that had made Haley welcome Dolores' sympathy! If she had only realized!

Gorman's face, she noticed, was well mauled. One eye was blackening. And his holster was empty. That explained those half defined sounds that she had heard just before she awakened: Haley, beating up and disarming his former partner. She flared, "Better turn me loose and ride! If Glenn catches up with you—"

"He won't, the dirty coyote!" snarled Gorman. "He thought I'd stay kicked out, only I came back, see? With Hank, here. He won't know yo're gone till he gets my note. Then you'll be acrost the Rio, in Mexico."

"What for?"

His own easy triumph made Gorman brag, "We usta throw a sticky loop, till he got too nice and quit. Now I need this spread he's got. A half way point fer cattle us boys 'buys' in Mexico. Nice box canyon on the Diamond Double B where we kin fix brands—Haley's expert—"

"I'll say he is," chortled Hank Marlin, "an' not only with cows!"

"You beast!" snapped Win, trying to shrug off his pawing hand. "If I were free, I'd claw your eyes out!"

"Yuh'll git yore chanct, m'am," leered Hank. "Unless Glenn gits good sense and jines up with us, an' plays square."

IT WAS all clear, now. Gorman, approaching Haley, had made no dents in his determination to go straight; whatever blackmailing proposition Gorman had made, Haley had declined it. Bitter regret at her jealous resentment was tempered by the thrill of knowing that Haley did care for her; that he wasn't a crook, but a man trying to escape from a past that had not been vicious—just youthful impulse.

They rode into the dawn, and all day the sun baked Win. The dust choked her; the hot breeze cracked her lips. They were now close to the Border, where the inhabitants knew neither God nor law.

The sun was setting. Win heard the bellowing of cattle across the wide, shallow Rio Grande. She smelled them in the dust that billowed toward her, caught the silhouette figures of *charros* who kept the herd in shape.

Gorman leaned out of the saddle, very close to Win, pretending to steady her as they forded the tricky stream. "Don't yuh worry about Hank. *He* ain't goin' tuh tech yuh."

As they neared camp, Win sized up the *remuda*. Judging from the number of horses, Gorman had a powerful organization. With such large herds of stolen beasts, Mexican and Texan alike, he would need a half way point. And fear gnawed again at her heart.

If Glenn rode to the rescue, his few men would die with him. Either that, or he'd have to become a cattle thief to save her; she would be a captive until he so far compromised himself that he could never hope for redemption.

Gorman used a grub wagon fly to improvise a shelter for Win. He soundly booted Hank away, with a warning to keep his hands off. But Gorman was far more dangerous than that disgusting little squint-eye. He grinned, nodded, removed Win's shoes before he released her hands. "Jest so's yuh don't try walking out. I'll be back, later on. In case Glenn ain't showin' up."

"Oh, good God," she moaned, once alone in that noisome early gloom. "He will come . . . and he's finished, anyway he turns. . . ."

But that he was not already on hand heartened her. If he arrived openly, he was doomed to death or thievery for her sake. But if he came stealthily, he'd either save her, or die like a man. Her brother had fallen before the outlaw guns that had almost killed her father, years ago. And as she prayed for Glenn, courage and desperation sharpened her wits.

She *had* to steal a horse. Only Glenn's peril could drive her barefooted over that rocky, thorn-strewn ground to the *remuda*. The camp was asleep at last. Creeping from her blankets to the opening of her improvised tent, she peered out at the *charros* snoring under their tarpaulins; they dotted the darkness like little grave slabs.

A spur tinkle warned her. She shrank back. Hank blocked the entrance. The moon had not yet risen, but she recognized his voice, knew his purpose. He had drunk enough *tequila* to make him reckless. He set the half emptied bottle down. His breath and his paws sickened her.

"You dirty little beast!" she gasped.

He snickered, licked his lips. "Won't no one—"

Fury drove her. She seized the bottle, smashed it against a rock, and slashed with the ragged neck, criss-crossing Hank's face. Blood blinded him. He howled, clawed his wounds. Voices of aroused men rumbled. She heard Gorman cursing. He knew.

Blood drenched Win. Fright, sheer panic drove her; range lore guided her more surely than knowledge. She did not take Hank's pistol; that would not help much. Instead, she snatched the canvas fly, screamed, waved the blood-spattered cloth in her race toward the *remuda*.

Horses are more temperamental than cattle; they stampede more readily. A wrangler cursed in Spanish, tried to brain her. But the damage was done. The skittish mustangs bolted, snorting, whinnying, p a n i c-stricken. Hoofs pounded through the camp, trampling the men before they could kick clear of their tarpaulins.

WIN kept on toward the river. She no longer felt the agony of feet and legs torn by cactus and mesquite. Anything to get away, hide until she could capture a horse whose panic had subsided. Gorman was bawling orders, cursing the men whose jumpy nerves made them fire at imaginary raiders.

Horses thundered past her. One, freakishly halting, waited for her approach, near the river's bank. But the smell of the blood on her hands frightened the beast anew, and he wheeled before she could

snatch at his mane. From behind her came the rhythmical hoof beats of horses under control. The stampede was cracked, and Gorman was combing the darkness, looking for his captive.

She plunged into the shallow stream, half swimming, half wading. Behind her was a splashing, a shouting. Never make the opposite bank! Gorman laughing, booming triumphantly. The moon was rising, and he could see the whiteness of her bare shoulders—

But he could not see the men who burst from cover on the opposite bank. Win did, screamed in sheer terror. No escape; she was surrounded.

And then those metallic glints ahead poured flame and lead. She dropped flat in the shallows. There was answering fire over her head. Gorman yelled, choked, splashed from his plunging horse. His men scrambled; and Glenn Haley's great voice boomed above the crackling blasts that chased the thieves back over the border, "Watch it, Shorty—fer Gawd's s a k e—yuh hit her—I'll kill yuh—!"

"He d i d n ' t—d a r l i n g—he didn't!" Win cried, scrambling ashore.

Haley leaned from the saddle, lifted her bodily to his horse. "I was jest fixin' tuh shoot the gizzard out of—"

"You got him," she cried, clinging close as he wheeled his mount. "I know all about it—he can't ever frame you again—my dear—"

"Yo're awful wet and awful nice, honey," said Glenn. She could just hear him above the drumming hoofs of the horses that followed. "I knowed Dolores was dead wrong about yuh makin' a fool of me."

"Dolores?"

He felt her grow tense. He laughed softly. "Shore. Her and her maw and old Mac allus thought I needed a guardeen, an' they reckoned yuh didn't act too much like a schoolm'am, an—"

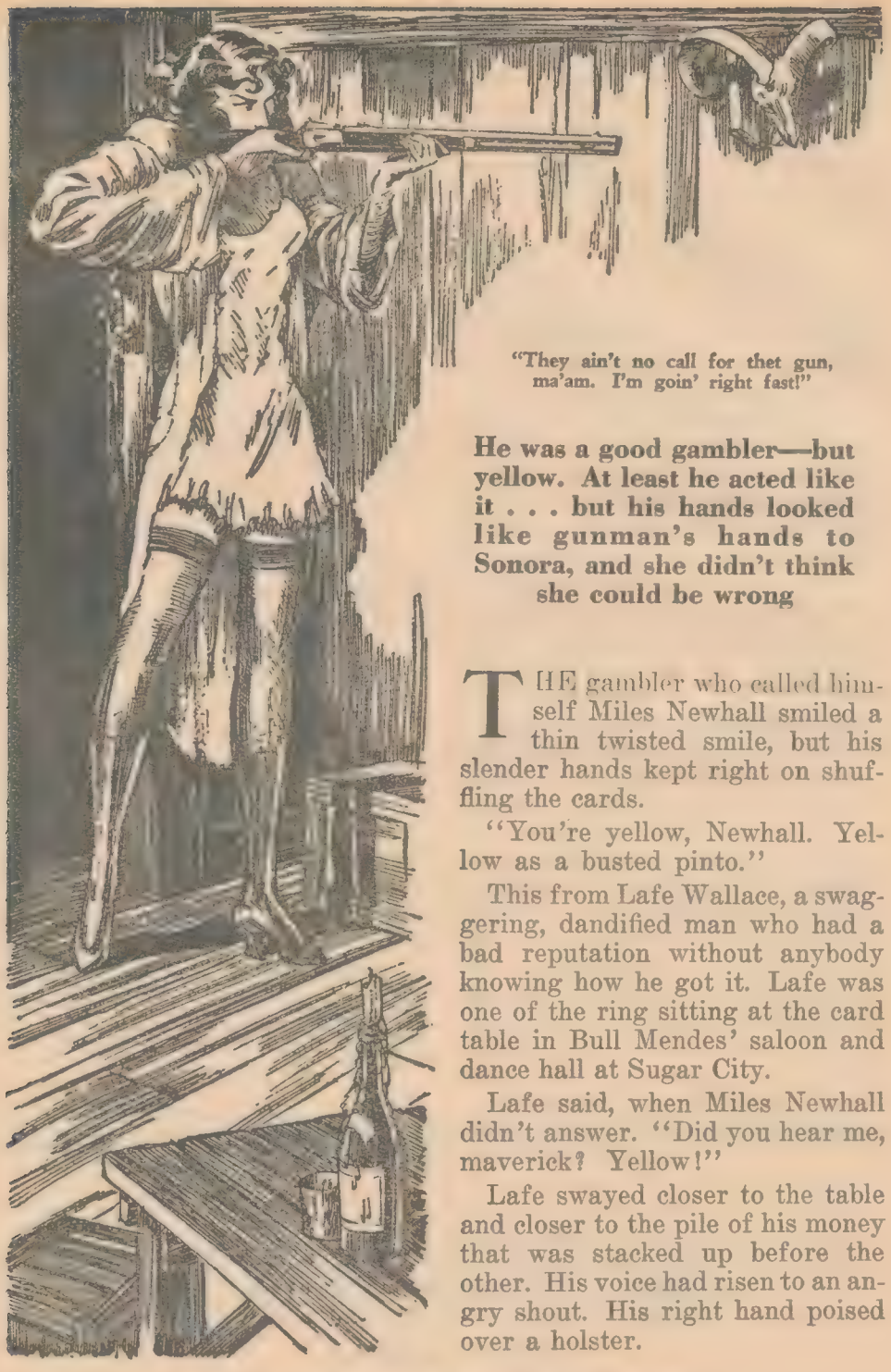
"You do need a guardian." She looked up at him, and the moon made her tear-jeweled eyes gleam. "I'm so happy—you've beat your past—"

"Speaking of guardeens," he chuckled. "Yo're elected, or I'm taking yuh back acrost the river. And they ain't no past, honey—jest future, with you tuh help square me with the folks in Bear Wallow."

COMING SOON—

"HELLSTICK HAVEN"

by Rex Norman



"They ain't no call for thet gun, ma'am. I'm goin' right fast!"

He was a good gambler—but yellow. At least he acted like it . . . but his hands looked like gunman's hands to Sonora, and she didn't think she could be wrong

THE gambler who called himself Miles Newhall smiled a thin twisted smile, but his slender hands kept right on shuffling the cards.

"You're yellow, Newhall. Yellow as a busted pinto."

This from Lafe Wallace, a swaggering, dandified man who had a bad reputation without anybody knowing how he got it. Lafe was one of the ring sitting at the card table in Bull Mendes' saloon and dance hall at Sugar City.

Lafe said, when Miles Newhall didn't answer. "Did you hear me, maverick? Yellow!"

Lafe swayed closer to the table and closer to the pile of his money that was stacked up before the other. His voice had risen to an angry shout. His right hand poised over a holster.

By STUART ADAMS

"Sit down, Lafe," the gambler said, his voice calm and unemotional, a little tired. "There's no call for gun play."

There was a stir among the watching cowboys and other pa-

ARIZONA YELLOW

trons of Bull's saloon. One of them laughed and another spat disgustedly. This one was dancing with a girl, a girl whose name was Sonora, she having come up from that way. She had on a short dress that showed her tapering legs, with a bit of white skin when she whirled her skirt. Above the bodice, rich curves crowded the neck of the dress. She was the principal dance and entertainment girl at Bull's place, and everybody knew there was something more than casual between her and Lafe Wallace. It was Lafe who brought her up from Sonora one time, and told Bull he might use her in the saloon.

This girl, Sonora, took a quick upward look at her partner when he spat out his disgust for a man who would sit still and be called yellow. She said, "You'll be doing that out of the other side of your mouth, bull-dogger, one of these days."

The cowboy said, "You're chewing the wrong cud. Think a real man would let Lafe slap that in his face?"

The girl didn't say anything for a minute. She just looked at Miles Newhall's hands. They were white and there were no rope callouses. The girl shrugged away from her partner, straightening her bodice at the collar but not concealing at all the curves that it was meant to cover. Now she said, more as if she talked to herself, "Them's gunman's hands or my legs have pony spavins on 'em."

The cowboy grinned good naturedly. "Don't take the bit, Sonora," he said. "They ain't gunman's hands or he'd be usin' them now. But that don't put spavins on your legs. They're plumb perfect, I'm sayin'. Leastwise I like 'em."

THE girl shrugged a shoulder and went up to the table. At first the crowd had backed away when Lafe spoke the shooting words. They were pushing forward now, eager to witness the gambler's humiliation.

One cowboy with a twisted nose said to his neighbor, "Did you hear what Sonora said? They fooled me, too, them hands. Gunman's hands if ever I seen 'em."

The neighbor nodded wisely. "Hands are like smellers, cowboy. They don't mean a devil of a lot if the man who has 'em ain't got guts."

Miles Newhall, who had come to Sugar City a stranger, two weeks before, went on to the deal. His face was calm. Mild, like a yearling's milk. The table ring was still snickering, Sonora swayed her hips and edged up close to the gambler. She stood next to him, almost brushing his arm with full curves that were covered with nothing but her thin, short skirt.

Lafe Wallace, with an oath, picked up the cards Miles Newhall had dealt him and threw them down on the table, face up. He said, "Yellow spines stink, whether they's coyotes with four feet or two. Will that make you draw?"

For one flashing minute the onlookers held their breath. Sonora jerked away from the gambler's shoulder and stepped back. It seemed like the gambler's hand had grown taut, as if it jerked, fingers spread for the draw, like

a gunman's hand. But the crowd guessed they'd been mistaken. Miles Newhall raked the cards across the whisky stained table and spoke soft. The crowd sighed with disappointment.

"You must have been seein' things, Lafe," he said, a little petulant. "I deal 'em straight. Don't draw that gun, Lafe. This ain't no night for murder."

Sonora, the girl, slid back up against the gambler. She put out a hand, sort of gentle like, speculatively, as if she wanted to touch the man, to comfort him in his agony. She bent over and rested her hands on the table rim. A strand of her hair floated before his eyes and her breath was warm upon his cheek. She would have said something but her movement stirred Lafe Wallace's anger anew. He rasped, "Git away from the yellow liver, you damn'—! I'm givin' him last warnin'. I'm gunnin' you, Newhall."

As he spoke, his foot snaked forward and his right hand swooped down. Taut fingers closed around his gun butt. He didn't see the derringer that the gambler had flipped down from his sleeve and held now flat in the palm of his hand. Sonora saw and for an instant her eyes glared hate and triumph at Lafe Wallace, about to collect in his heart one of those derringer bullets—before he could make his draw. Nobody else saw.

But if Sonora expected shooting she was disappointed, and so was Lafe Wallace. A strong wiry hand clamped about Lafe's wrist. Like he'd done many a time before, Sheriff Jim Hawley had come up just in time to stop a gun fight. Not a big man, or a young one, the sheriff, but Lafe turned over his gun, meek like, and so did two of Lafe's closest friends, Dan Evans and Ed Lambert, who bore the same stripe that Lafe Wallace bore.

There was a rumble of criticism of Sheriff Jim. Someone said, "Seems like you ought to be out huntin' down the Arizona Kid, sheriff, with all us willin' to help you, 'stead o' takin' part for a crooked gambler as ain't got his mother's spunk."

NOW being twitted about the Arizona Kid was poison to Sheriff Jim Hawley. Three weeks before, the Oregon stage, carrying placer gold from Carson City, had been held up by the Arizona Kid at the coulee across the trail just before it drops into Bald Eagle Gulch. And a week before that the Kid, single handed, had held up the Ajax mine, two miles from town, just when they were readying a silver shipment, and had toted off all he could pack in his saddle bags. It was surprising to hear of the Arizona Kid working down Sugar City way, his hunting grounds being up in the Montana badlands.

He'd never been heard of down that way since he crossed up from Arizona. But there wasn't any doubt. The Kid had left his name, mocking like, scrawled on a piece of paper at the stage driver's feet when he rode away. And when the mine people got over their scare and came outside they found his name, scribbled on the door of the mine toolhouse.

The sheriff took his twitting

calmly, even if it did hurt. "I take up my business when it comes along," he said. "I'm helpin' out this gambler now, just like sooner or later I'll help the Arizona Kid into my jail. I got to wait till that business comes up to be 'tended to."

Lafe Wallace swaggered out. Sonora, the girl, got in his way, to say something but his hand snaked out and he slapped her hard, slamming her up against the wall. Miles Newhall was watching the handsome-like Lafe bully his way through the crowd and he saw the slap Sonora took on her cheek. He winced, but turned to gather up his cards.

Pretty soon, nobody being at the table now, nobody wanting to play with a yellow coward, Miles got up and sauntered to the back of the dance hall where the booths were. He walked slow, his head up, but there was pain in his face. A good-looking, youngish face, with smoke blue eyes. Tall and on the slight side. With a green silk vest, edged with red braid, his gun hung at his belt from an open holster, under his coat. No good, that gun, since he was scared to use it.

He sat in a booth and Sonora came back to sit with him. She adjusted her dress more nearly to cover the skin above the bodice and edged her skirt down so that her knees wouldn't show. This wasn't the kind of man a woman likes to make notice her charms.

"Ain't you feelin' bad," she asked him, "havin' everybody say what a coward you are? You, a good looker like you are?"

"It hurts ma'am, yes, ma'am. But a man can't change his stripes no more'n a leopard can."

"A woman must feel funny with you," said Sonora. "I mean a woman you'd get before she knew you had pampas grass for a spine."

He smiled at her, kind of wistful like. "So I guess. Seems like women like fightin' men best. Say, like that Arizona Kid that's been ridin' high hereabouts."

Sonora took a long sigh and looked longing like.

"Your speaking, hombre. Maybe he's a bad man, maybe he's a killer an' a thief. But he's the kind that does a woman good. I wouldn't give a inch of a man like that for the whole herd of these cowboys and bunkhouse hands."

"Anybody ever seen him 'round here?"

"You loco? Would it be like the Arizona Kid to let them see him as shouldn't? But—I'm thinkin'. Maybe I will."

Miles Newhall looked up questioningly. "You plannin' on seein' him? Seems to me he'd be pretty shy of this country."

Sonora looked down the length of her lithesome figure. She patted her bodice and round curves lifted. Above her neckline the flesh was pink, warm, breathtaking.

SUDDENLY she leaned across the table. "I heard something today. I can tell you 'cause none of the men will talk to you, so you won't let it out. Sheriff Jim, he got a letter today. Came in on the stage this morning. It was from the Arizona Kid. It was put in the mail bag from right close here. It says that he's coming back. It says that he's going to walk right

in here, into Bull's place, and clean out the place. The sheriff thinks he's bluffin', or that he's goin' to hold up some other place. Maybe the Silver Lady Mine, next to the Ajax. 'Cause, the sheriff says, he'd naturally put the law on the wrong trail. But I ain't so sure. A man like that, maybe he'll do just what he says."

Miles Newhall shuddered a little. Sonora saw and her lips curled. "Don't be afraid, mister. I'll be here. I'll protect you."

"Thanks, ma'am. I'd hate powerful to be caught in line with the Arizona Kid's bullets. How do you know all this? I ain't heard nothing said around."

"Even if anybody else knew, you wouldn't hear. You're too yellow to talk to. But Lafe Wallace—he finds out things like that. Sheriff Jim ain't let on, but Lafe knows he got the letter."

The two friends of Lafe Wallace, Dan Stevens and Ed Lambert, swayed over to the table. Both were drunk. Both were ugly. Miles Newhall shook a little and his face went white when Ed's and Dan's hands dropped to their holsters. Ed said to Sonora. "Shame to yerself, woman. Makin' up to a critter like this. If Lafe was here, he'd put his fists on you. Me an' Dan's Lafe's friends. I'm puttin' my fists on you an' leavin' Lafe's brand.

The girl jumped back in her chair but all at once she sat up and her eyes were shining. Dan drew back his fist, then stared at that look in the girl's face. He looked at the gambler, and he looked down the muzzle of a six gun, just pointing at him, quiet like, steady, Miles Newhall not saying a word.

"I'll be damned," Dan swore and his gun whipped out. But coming up, coming up to square off, it was whipped out of his hand. Whipped out by a bullet. Just one explosion from Miles Newhall's iron. Dan grabbed his hand and danced around yelling. Bull Mendes came up raging. The gambler looked at him, quizzical like, and looked at his gun. He said, upset like, "You got to pardon me, mister. It must have went off—by itself. I—I didn't mean to shoot. Honest, I'm no shootin' man."

Ed Lambert took Dan Stevens away cursing. Sonora leaned across the table. She said, "How about it, hombre? Me an' you? You won enough tonight to spend a little, and I'm feelin' like helpin' you do it. Now, before Lafe comes back."

Miles said, "Well, I did win a lot. I'd pay out most of it to talk to somebody who wouldn't call me yellow."

"I'm your calf," said Sonora rising. "We won't talk much, an' I don't know the word yellow."

Miles Newhall went back with Sonora. He sighed when she closed the door behind them and locked it. It was good to be with somebody who wouldn't show him up for the coward he was.

MILES turned down the lamp, half-way, and when he turned around, after a moment, Sonora was perched on the room's only chair, watching him. Her hand was at her breast, her dress had fallen above crossed knees, the sheen of her stockings was tinted by the flickering light; and he could see

the gleam of her red garters.

She rose to her feet slowly, danced for a minute before him, slipping away from the arms he moved to put around her. "You think," she said, "if the Arizona Kid was here 'stead of you, he'd like me?"

"I don't want to think about another man being here," he said. "Just me and you."

IT WASN'T very pleasant for Miles to hang around town in the day time, the cowmen in from the ranges knowing he was yellow and laughing in his face. He got onto his big Texas sorrel, a pure bred, and took a lope into Bald Eagle Gulch. He passed the coulee at the mouth of the Gulch where the Arizona Kid had held up the stage. He stopped and looked around him here, at the place especially where they'd found the Wells Fargo guard shot through the heart, and a young girl passenger with her lungs shot through. It had been a nasty killing.

On down the Gulch, which was the way the Arizona Kid had ridden to his escape, the young gambler rode slowly. He wasn't a range man, but he sat his horse easily, as if he was used to having leather between him and the ground. He was wrapped in his own bitter thoughts until he noticed a path, a lone pony path, that climbed the side of the gulch. He turned his horse up this path, which was overhung with brush growth. He came out on a clearing before a boarded up cabin that had a deserted look. But when he had pushed in the door his senses told him that he wasn't alone.

He made a noise and said, to the empty room, "I didn't mean to bust in on anybody, but me an' my horse is feelin' like a bit of water."

He heard a gasp in the kitchen room and then he gasped himself at sight of the girl who was framed in a doorway. It wasn't the kind of girl a man comes upon every day. She had wavy brown hair that fell down to her waist, the way she'd let it down, and her face was white as though she hadn't ridden the range much, in the sun. Her hands were white, too, fragile, and so was the rest of her —which Miles could see because she'd taken off her riding duds, whatever they were, and was in a wrapper of some kind that didn't have many fastenings to hold it together.

Underneath she was in black stockings and something flimsy that caressed curves that were only half concealed. Suddenly she grasped her wrapper together and then only her slender legs and round knees showed when she took a step.

Miles started to say, "I'm sure beggin' your pardon, ma'am," but he choked it off. The girl jumped back, grabbed a Sharp's buffalo rifle she had stood up in the other room, and swung the barrel on him.

"You get out of here," she said, cold, harsh. "Git—pronto. Before—before—" She didn't finish that, but Miles knew she wanted him to get away before somebody came. He said:

"They ain't no call for that, ma'am. "I'm goin', right fast. You can put your gun down."

"I'm not putting it down while I hear your footsteps," she declared. "And you'd better make 'em fast."

He didn't move in a hurry. While she held her gun the wrapper fell open, giving him a flashing glimpse of slender curves. Miles thought he's never seen anything more lovely in his life. He wished he were the man who was coming soon to find her waiting for him like that.

He didn't say any more, just backed out. When he was in the door, the girl let a smiling sneer cross her red lips.

"You're really yellow, aren't you? Just like they say. Back away from a woman."

"I always back away from a woman, ma'am. No tellin' when a woman's finger will get nervous."

He closed the door, closing her in. While his foot was in his stirrups, he studied the ground. There were footprints. Two sets. He could pick out the girl's. They came from off the range, behind the cabin. Just one line of them —her coming. The other prints he looked at a long time. He could tell they came up from the gulch, that they'd gone into the cabin and then come out to go around behind.

To himself he said, "I interrupted. He's already here. He saw me come up and he's stayin' in hidin'. He won't stay hidin' long after I'm gone—not from that bag of candy."

WHEN he was in leather, he looked across the range, in the direction the girl's footsteps had come from. There was a spiral of smoke over there that denoted a ranch house. He went down into the gulch, at the head turned into a wagon road that led toward the smoke.

The buildings of a small ranch spread loomed and he rode around the main house into the back yards. Besides the house stock there was a string of vicious looking broncs in a corral. From the bunkhouse two cowboys ambled up and looked at him expectantly. He asked for water. One of the cowboys said, "I'm Lannigan, the bronc boss. I take it you're the yellow gambler. We don't want none of you around here. Take your water and be runnin'."

Miles let out a long sigh and would have jumped back into his saddle but he saw the girl of the cabin coming across the range. She was walking fast, swinging a hat, and came around the corral to the back steps of the main house before she noticed Miles. Then she stopped and stared. She was in skirt and waist now, and looked fresh and dainty. But her eyes held both fear and anger. Miles swept off his hat. "I'm not sayin', ma'am, as we've met before," he said.

She tilted her chin and gave him a scornful stare. "Who would believe anything you'd say, mister?" she asked coolly. She added, "A yellow thing like you."

For once Miles' face turned black, but it cleared sharply and he was sad as he asked Lannigan, the bronc boss, who might be the owner of the spread.

"Sheriff Jim Hawley," the bronc boss said. "An' the lady you

been talkin' to is Sheriff Jim's daughter. When he's attendin' to his sheriffin' an' ain't here, she's the ranch boss."

The gambler said a funny thing. He said, "Thanks, Mister Lannigan. I'm sure indebted to you for tellin' me—she's the sheriff's daughter."

From the ranch of Sheriff Jim's, Miles rode out to the Ajax mine and talked with the foreman, who was glad to talk of the day the Arizona Kid held up the mine even to the yellow gambler.

"How he knowed we was shippin' silver," the foreman said, "beats me all hollow. Nobody knew but us an' the sheriff. The sheriff was plannin' to send a deputy on the stage after we loaded, but this feller, the Kid, he got here first. Guess we was wise not to put up a fight, seein' as what he did to them two on the stage a week later. Seems like too bad he couldn't a stayed back in Montana where he belongs."

Miles said, "Down to Bull Mendes' place they say, what hearin' I get, that it ain't like the Arizona Kid. That girl, Sonora, she was tellin' me last night that the sheriff is plumb puzzled because the Arizona Kid ain't got a reputation as a robber. An' what killin' o' his they knows about was done in card brawls, fair and square. This girl, Sonora, she told me that an' she seems to know."

"Sonora knows a lot," the foreman admitted, "but take it any way your rope throws—he's done plenty robbin' an' killin' here. Let Sheriff Jim get 'im, he won't be on solid ground long."

THAT night at Bull's place Miles sat at a table ready to take on all comers. He shuffled his cards idly for a time. Sonora sauntered up, her hips swaying alluringly. She said, "Me and you again tonight, pardner? I'll tell you more about the Arizona Kid. That is, if Lafe doesn't get back."

"Where's Lafe? I aimed to take a little of his money again tonight."

She shrugged. "Lafe said he'd be late comin' in. If he don't come at all, it will be quick enough."

"You ain't favorin' Lafe Wallace, are you? An' him being your special sweetheart, like."

She flashed him a sharp look. "That lobo? You didn't look close enough last night. You an' me have tonight again, an' I'll show you marks on my back, from my knees to my shoulders, that's the marks of Lafe Wallace's latigo. I got more today because I didn't frisk you last night. I was supposed to get Lafe's winnings back."

Miles was reflective. "Seems like if this Arizona Kid turns up an' robs Bull," he said, "he ought to rob Lafe Wallace of you, too."

She looked down at him a minute. "He'd never be sorry," she said. "He'd always remember, even if he turned me out to grass the next day. Just so it was on some other range."

Cowboys came up and sat down silently and shoved money onto the table. Among them were Dan Evans and Ed Lambert. They sat facing the door. "Deal, Yellow," Dan grunted. "An' deal square. I'm in a shootin' mood tonight, an' the sheriff is off on a trail."

Miles didn't answer. He dealt and won, almost every hand. Now and again he shoved part of his winnings into his pocket. Ed Lambert grumbled but Miles said, "I'll bring it out when there's more room in front of me. You'll get all the play you ask for tonight, friends."

But it didn't seem as if Dan and Ed cared much about what they lost. Their attention was on the door. It was only Sonora, hanging around the table watching Miles that noticed that tonight he was wearing two guns in his belt holsters instead of his customary one. She frowned at that and kept watching his hands.

Two or three times Miles asked Dan and Ed where Lafe Wallace was. Neither time would they answer. They told him it was none of his business. As the play moved on, the two became more and more ill at ease.

Miles, observing, hitched his chair around so he could see the door. When Sonora got between him and the entrance he pushed her back roughly. "I'm lookin' for Lafe," he explained. "I don't want him sneakin' up on me. I like to know in advance when my death's comin' on."

Sonora said, under her breath, "You don't fool me no more, mister. Them h a n d s—gunman's hands."

And then it happened, sudden.

THE swinging doors flew open with a crash. A masked man strode in. A six-gun barked, like a warning, shooting to the ceiling. The masked man held two guns in his hands. A woman screamed shrilly and Sonora let out a yearning sob—"He's come!" she breathed. "The Arizona Kid. If only he'd take me away."

The bandit said, "Good evenin', gents. Backs to the wall, pardners. Reachin' high."

It was a muffled voice. Like talking through mush. Or as if the bandit had a quarter of tobacco in either cheek to change the sound of himself. Chairs scraped slowly while Bull Mendes whined. Everybody back to the wall save Miles Newhall, who sat stiff, as if scared out of his wits. Sonora called to him, called his name, to rouse him to his danger. The bandit turned on him. "Yuh kin stay where you are, mister," he said. "I heard tell o' you. Mister Yellow. You don't count."

Miles looked around stupidly then. He saw Ed Lambert and Dan Stevens, down the room by the door. They were standing on either side of the door and their hands were high. Miles wondered how they'd got there. They were standing alone.

The bandit called one of the cowboys forward and flipped his gun from his holster. Then he ordered the cowboy to go down the line and clutter the floor with all other guns.

"An' then you'll shell out, hombres," the bandit growled. "An' make it pronto. The Arizona Kid ain't got no patience whatever."

One cowboy, disgusted, sounded an oath, "Damned if I will," and reached for his gun. The bandit's iron spit flame. The cowboy crumpled with a groan.

"Any as wants it kin have some

of the same," the muffled voice of the bandit grunted. Sonora let out a sob that was of fright this time. She held her hands over her breasts, now, hiding them from the Arizona Kid, who was a cold murderer.

Just then Miles Newhall's chair scraped. The bandit swung around to the sound, his guns snaking out.

Miles spoke softly. "Just a minute, Mister Badman."

"What the hell's eatin' you?" the bandit barked. "I'm gunnin' you now for gettin' on your feet. Them as stands behind 'im get out the way while I'm givin' you a chance."

THEN Miles Newhall made Sonora scream. For his hands came down out of the air, almost slow. The bandit stared, unbelieving, his guns wavering an instant. Miles Newhall's hands stopped coming down. Again he spoke soft like, "I'm givin' you the breaks, Lafe Wallace. It's me tellin' you —I'm gunnin' you."

Everything bleared then, everything into one picture. Nothing clear, nothing distinct. The bandit's guns came up exploding. But two spurts of flame leaped out from Miles Newhall's hips. Simultaneous. The masked gambler leaped aside as he fired, but one gun crashed to the floor and slithered along the wood. One of his arms hung limp. He whirled back, his good hand pumping lead, but two more shots came from Miles Newhall's guns and the bandit shriveled down into the dust on Bull Mendes' floor.

Down by the door Dan Stevens and Ed Lambert jumped a step into the room. Both reached for their guns and the steel glinted as they came up. Miles whirled. Two bullets went down the room and went true. Dan and Ed swung around, each with a slug in his shoulder. Both dropped to their knees writhing.

Calmly Miles Newhall walked over to the cringing bandit and stood over him. "I'm not puttin' another bullet into you, Lafe," he said, his voice like iron, "but I'm lettin' you live if they can save you. I'm lettin' you live to regret that you slander the range riders by wearing a cowboy's heel, you common renegade."

The bandit's mask had not fallen off. Sonora leaped away from the wall to stand over him. She would have grabbed for the mask but Miles stayed her.

"No need to look," he said. "I found cowboy heel prints in the Gulch, where they'd gone to keep a lover's meetin'. It was a lover's meetin' no cowboy would have dared keep, because of the girl it was he'd fooled into meetin' him there. I been lookin' for cowboy heels on them as wasn't cowboys, and I ain't found none but them you see there on the badman's boots—and Lafe Wallace was the only man who doesn't belong on the range who wears them high heels."

Sure enough, there they were on the bandit's boots—cowboy heels. Now Sonora swept off the mask and the pain twisted face of Lafe Wallace looked up. Miles dropped low and spoke so nobody could hear, unless maybe Sonora.

"Maybe you'll be livin', Lafe.

An' your friends, Dan an' Ed. But you won't be tellin' that you made the sheriff's gal think you was a man so she could tell you, innocent like, when the gold shipment was comin' through, and when the mine was shippin'—and that her pa was goin' out tonight on an empty trail, so you could play your bandit game. If you're tellin', or your friends is tellin', I'll be comin' back and I'll be takin' you out of jail and burnin' your tongues out with fire. You won't die easy like, on the gallows."

Miles Newhall stood up, then, and looked at Sonora.

She was staring at him, open mouthed. She asked, hollow voiced, "Who—who are you?"

"I'M TAKIN' you away, ma'am, to some better range where you can feel peaceful like," he said. "An' maybe you'll learn like they have up in Montana, that the Arizona Kid is proud of his name, because there's only rightful killin's hitched to it. He don't allow no coyotes like Lafe Wallace to be usin' it promiscuous like, to scare folks with."

He swept her up then, caught her in one arm and lifted her, easy like. He carried her to the door, her dress up above her knees the way he carried her, careless, so that the last they saw of her in Bull Mendes' place was the round curves of her knees and the shine of red garters. That and her smile.

When the swinging doors closed behind him, and they heard his horse galloping off into the night, a cowboy picked up his gun and his hat and scratched his chin. He asked the room at large, "I'm glad I never said he was yellow. I'd be plumb disheartened o' my judgment."

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He approached and saw sunlight glinting on a rifle barrel.

By LANE KENTON

KILLER'S CARESS

The war raged—cattle baron vs. homesteader, and, between the firing lines was the loveliest girl Frio had ever known. But how could such a girl be his—belong to a man who lived by his guns?

THE stern cold way, usual with Frio Lang, was absent now. He relaxed in the saddle as his horse picked an easy way over the pine needle-carpeted ground, hoofs making no sound at all. If there were trouble in this range, the soft day belied the fact.

And Frio Lang was not given to reaching out for trouble. But when it came to him, it always found him meeting it halfway!

The senses and signs of trouble reached toward him now.

Sharp, high, a woman's raised voice was suddenly in his ears. A half scream, containing a mixture of angry defiance and fear, it sounded ahead and to the right of him. A rumble of male voice, another sharp cry, and Frio Lang had reined up and was standing in the stirrups, trying to see through the timber and brush ahead.

He slipped from the saddle, looped reins over his left arm, and walked quietly, steadily ahead. The relaxed face was gone, and a pinched, frigid bleakness was on his face.

Sound took form and became words as he left his horse, then, and wormed through the brush and trees. He heard a woman sob, and a man jeer gutturally. He went to hands and knees, crawling forward. Abruptly stopped then, as the brush terminated along a little foothill stream.

HE STIFLED a curse, unable to believe his eyes. Two men and a girl were there beside the stream, and Frio's steely eyes were first for her. Held with both arms pinned to the ground, the girl sobbed and tried to pull away. Hopelessly. A torn bit of a man's blue shirt was flung to one side, and from the waist up, the girl was covered only by tatters, her seductive curves a beacon to a man's eyes.

Neckerchiefs tied over their faces, the men held her down. "Talk, you wildcat," one of them snarled. "You'll tell us where Code Cuyler is—"

"I won't!" she choked. "Never."

"Off comes some more. And if

that don't work, well, the crick water is pretty cold."

A heavy hand gripped the remnants of her clothes, ripped. The girl shuddered, sobbed, writhed frantically. Only a tiny silken garment covering her, her pitiful contortions merely served to show a perfect little body to more effect.

Soft, snow-white skin. Firm legs that tapered to shapely ankles. She closed her eyes and her words came through set teeth: "I'll never tell!"

"No?" one of the masked men croaked hoarsely, drops of sweat breaking on his brow. His beady eyes above the handkerchief heatedly devoured that slender little form. He reached to complete her forceful undressing.

What was it all about, Frio didn't know. Whatever it was, it had gone too far. He thrust himself to his feet and the heavy pistol that had been holstered at his right hip was magically in his hand.

"Reach, damn you!"

He stepped into view.

The men lifted to their feet, whirling their hands arresting motion halfway to their guns. Slowly, those hands started skyward.

A short cry from the girl, and a curse from Frio Lang. One of them grabbed her, held her in front of him. Wordless, only their eyes glaring the hate that was theirs, they held her writhing body as a shield as they backed a little circle, gained the timber.

"Whoever you are, you'll learn not to horn in on this," one of them snarled. He gave the girl a shove that sent her stumbling toward Frio. Frio moved, sent two shots into the brush. The pair had disappeared.

HUDDLED on the ground, sobbing, reaction gripped the girl. Frio went to his knees, raised her. The warmth of her, the yielding softness, stabbed him with a feeling such as he'd never known before. And this man, who followed the gun trails, who had never let women bother him, found his heart pounding furiously.

She responded instinctively, as a wounded animal to one who has protected it. Her soft arms went around his neck and she was pressing against him, sobbing on his chest. Each convulsion of her body pressed firm, soft curves against him, and he slid one hand down under her smooth, rounded knees and lifted her in his arms.

His lips were dry and a strange sort of glaze filmed his eyes. And then he was suddenly putting her on her feet and stepping back. "Girl!" he mumbled hoarsely.

She seemed startled. And then a slow red crept over her. But there seemed no shame of it. Proudly, almost, she went to get her clothes. And deliberately and unashamed, she donned them, covered herself as best she could with the torn garments. In a sort of dazed way, Frio watched her.

He was forced to use all his iron will to stay himself from once more gathering her into his arms.

"Miss, what sort of business is this, when two skunks strip off a woman's clothes? What was it you refused to tell?"

A mask seemed drawn upon her face. She looked at him suspiciously. Frio Lang's horse came out

of the brush; came to nuzzle his neck and playfully knock off his hat. In mock anger, he threatened the animal. A smile crossed the girl's lips.

"Your horse likes you. You must be kind. At least, you were to me. Those men caught me while I was fishing there." She pointed to where a slender bamboo rod lay near the stream. "We didn't think they would dare harm a woman."

"We?" He looked puzzled.

She nodded. "My uncle, Code Cuyler. Our cabin is just around that bend. We've a homestead here. Anyhow, they grabbed me, and started—" she blushed and looked away from him—"tearing my clothes, trying to make me tell where Uncle Code is hiding."

Sitting there beside her, her nearness drew him, and that annoyed him. Girls—this sort anyway—weren't for men who lived by their guns. Killers, some called his kind . . .

"What is your uncle hiding for? And who wants to find him?"

She studied him intently. "I can't believe you're trying to trick me," she revealed. "It's like this: We're on the Silver Bench of Haze Basin. Silver Bench is held by homesteaders, small cattle outfits. The Basin itself is held by Swan Yark and Hack Tinchley. One, or both of them, are trying to drive the small outfits out of here."

He nodded, lips curling. "A story as old as the cow country," he agreed. "Big men can't see changing times, and want an empire to themselves. Well?"

"Whichever outfit is doing this, they've killed men, killed cattle, destroyed hay-fields and burned buildings. My uncle got proof. He knows who is doing it. And when they learned of it, they came after him. He had to hide—he and a rancher we call Paw Normandy."

"You know what this proof is? Who it concerns?"

She shook her head. "I didn't have time to learn. And my uncle can't use it. The range is being watched. He wouldn't have a chance of getting out of the Basin alive, right now."

"And you know where your uncle is hiding, eh?"

She seemed to freeze instantly. Frio shrugged. "If you do or you don't, you're riding a slippery saddle. And if you've got any friends, best keep them by."

"There's only one small rancher who's managed to stave them off so far," she muttered. "John Freitas, who has the place above us."

"I supposed there'd be—some friend," he answered, angry at himself because the idea annoyed him. "You've told him where your uncle is hiding?"

"I've told no one!" she snapped.

"Good girl. Sit tight. Maybe I'll come around to call on you in a day or so. I like this country, and sort of aim to stay."

She unbent. "Perhaps I won't be so unfit to receive you, then!" There was a certain teasing way about her he chose to ignore. It made her wonder more about him. Pointblank, she asked: "What do you intend doing here?"

"I don't know—quite," he said, getting ready to mount his horse. In the saddle, he looked down at her. "Maybe get me a job with

Tinchley or with Yark. Right now, I wouldn't know."

HE LEFT her a victim to a hundred emotions. Wonder and worry, and uppermost of all, desire to draw him out and reveal the true side of himself.

Swan Yark's spread lay below the Bench, along the west side of Haze Basin. A big place, somehow exuding an air of sullen secretiveness. And the men around the spacious yards matched this atmosphere. Two-gun toters, a lot of them, Frio noted as he swung to the ground.

A tall, dark man came swinging from the direction of the house, hands on his hips near the pair of guns he wore. His manner, his clothing, told Frio Lang this man was the big boss there: Swan Yark. In this surmise, he was correct.

Frio stood near his horse, studying this hawk-faced one until Yark stopped up short. "You, stranger," he barked. "What's your business here?"

"Why," Frio answered easily, "I come to hunt a riding job. Anything wrong with that?"

"Mouthy, ain't you? Yeah, there's plenty wrong with that. Just plenty." He studied Frio closely and seemed to fight himself. "For all I know, you could be on Hack Tinchley's payroll, and come to raise hell here. Damn him, if you are, you can get back and tell him. I'm getting set to have it out with him. He can't pull it, I'd tell a man!"

"Pull what?" Frio innocently inquired.

"If you don't know: I mean hazing the nesters on the Bench, and trying to blame it on me. He wants that Bench so he'll hold range on both sides of me."

"I reckon it was this Tinchley's men I run onto today, trying to undress a girl," Frio allowed. "They was masked, and run into the brush."

Swan Yark cursed. Too loud, too much, Frio believed.

"If you done that, cowboy, you're aces with me. I think a lot of that girl, and if Tinchley has started that—"

He seemed to choke. He didn't ask enough questions, either, Frio thought. That wasn't natural—unless a man knew the answers ahead of time. Yark raised his voice. "Freitas," he called.

A tow-headed, almost chinless man with milky eyes came from a group near the saddle corral. John Freitas, small rancher whom the girl said was her friend. The girl. It occurred to Frio that he hadn't even learned her name. And she said that Freitas had been one of the small ranchers able to stave off the big outfits . . .

"Freitas, this is—what's your name?"

"Maybe John Smith. Common name, but a nice one," Frio said.

"Yeah. Common, *and* handy. Anyway, I'm going to send you up to Freitas' place to help out. Freitas, has a small place on the Bench. I want to see Tinchley don't bother him. You good with that smoke-pole you pack?"

"Middling, is all. Fair enough."

Freitas did not meet Frio's eyes. He walked away to one side with Swan Yark. Frio could not catch their words. He studied the men around the place. And while he

couldn't be certain, he would almost have sworn that one man, perched in a bunkhouse doorway, was one of the pair who'd run before his shots that morning.

"Come on," Freitas grunted, coming back to him. They mounted and rode back toward the Bench. Frio seemed to feel a dozen pair of hostile eyes boring into his back.

THEY ran out of the Basin and began to climb. The timber thickened, and there were stretches of bare rock. Uncommunicative, Freitas was watching Frio out of the corners of his shifty eyes.

Beneath the shelter of a scraggly, rock-clinging tree, Frio paused, drew tobacco and paper from his pocket and started to roll a smoke. Freitas rode on a few paces, until he was above Frio and almost at his back. Frio's mouth tightened grimly, his eyes were gimlets in his cold face.

"That girl, this morning," he said, easily enough. "What's her name?"

"Sally Tulare," Freitas snarled. "Not that knowin' it will ever do *you* any good!"

Frio's tobacco and papers fell from his hands as he dropped limply out of the saddle. The explosion of Freitas' gun ran up over the Bench and seemed to bounce back at them. Frio landed in a half-squatting position, his own gun drawn. There was a mocking, wolfish way to him.

The hammer of his gun dropped, was thumbed back and fell once more. John Frietas' scream ended abruptly in a burbling cough that let blood gush past his lips. He grabbed at the saddle-horn, missed, fell heavily to the ground. He did not move.

"I thought so," Frio said quietly, pushing more shells into his gun. "And it sort of proves that Hack Tinchley wasn't trying to run a sandy when he wrote for an investigation up in here. Mister Yark had a description of me from them two men. And he was using this shifty-faced Freitas. Damn a Judas to the weak side in a mess like this!"

Without another look at the body of Freitas, he mounted and rode on up the Bench. He was going to see Sally Tulare, and the idea, against his will, made him glow inwardly.

"She'll burn where I touched that doggone warm hide of hers," he grunted, reprimanding himself. "When she finds out who and what I am." Yet despite this prediction to himself, he was remembering the softness, the whiteness of her body the perfect form of it.

HE GAINED the creek and followed it around the bend, to where a three-room log cabin stood in a clump of whispering alder trees. Late afternoon sunlight glinted on a rifle barrel thrust through a window.

"More scared than she'll admit," Frio told himself, his admiration rising.

She appeared in the doorway, then, and a glad expression marked her heart-shaped little face. "It didn't take you long to call," she teased.

He dropped rein and came up to her. "No, Miss Sally, it did not. But it ain't a social call."

"Oh," she seemed angered.

"I'd like to come in, if you'll let me."

Changeable, she. Now she smiled and stepped back. "Of course."

Inside, in a combined living and dining room, he sat down. She took a chair facing him, and he found himself staring at her shapely ankles, showing under a short gingham dress. He set his teeth and looked away.

"Miss Sally, I've got to know where your uncle is," he said.

"You do work for one of them!" she cried.

Doggedly, he shook his head. "No. And not as much as this John Freitas did work for Swan Yark." He looked straight into her eyes. "Swan's sneak, Freitas, is dead. Lead poison. He tried to shoot me in the back."

She started. But there was no wild grief to her, as there might have been had Freitas really been a lover or a true friend.

"Why should he shoot you in the back?"

"Tried to," he corrected. "Because I chased Swan's men away from you this morning, and because he thought I might be a Tinchley man. So Swan aimed to have me killed. I don't kill so easily. That's my game, you see."

She studied him intently, and there was no fear, no loathing in the way of it. "I can believe that guns are your game," she agreed. "And right now, this country has need of such—if they are honest. Being a gunman doesn't make it follow you are *bad.*"

He wanted to grab her in his arms, and say and do the things he had wanted to do earlier that day. It was with difficulty he restrained himself. "I've got to find your uncle, and see this proof of his," he insisted. He reached into an inside pocket of his doeskin jumper. Handed her a paper and a tiny badge.

"Why didn't you say so?" she cried.

"Tell I was sent here by the State, to clean up this mess and see who was at the bottom of it? For all I knew, the small outfits themselves might've been the trouble-makers. Like Freitas."

"I—I sort of lied about him," she smiled. "I never liked him, really. And since Uncle Code hid out, he's been trying to learn from me where uncle was."

"I watched Tinchley for a couple weeks," Frio revealed. "And was satisfied he was honest. And right now, Tinchley is watching Yark. But Tinchley can't make a move—until we get proof Yark is hiring gunmen, and has been behind the trouble here. It means hell, hot and sudden, and them as is in this State have seen enough war on cattle lands."

"Tinchley watching Yark. If only we'd known that for sure," she breathed. "So it's been Yark's men, watching me these days since my uncle hid. Yark—" She shuddered. "He used to come here to see me. And the way he looked at me—made me feel naked, and ashamed."

"We can get to your uncle tonight?" he queried.

"No. That's impossible. We'll slip out before daylight. And," she smiled, "I'll feel safer with you here tonight."

"Safer?" he wondered.

"I was safe with you this morning," she laughed, rising and going into the little kitchen. He followed her.

"I thought you'd feel, well, sort of defiled, having a paid trouble-buster, a gunman, hold you as I did," he offered.

She set a pan on the stove and turned to him. "I didn't feel that way," she said, almost defiantly. "In fact," low-voiced, eyes downcast, "I liked it."

HE DIDN'T know how nor did she. But she was in his arms, and Frio Lang wasn't cold one bit. The press of her warm body to him was somehow stunning. Her lips, moist, yielding, fought a battle with his own. She pushed away from him.

"Not—now," she panted.

"Uh—yeah. I guess that's right. Or was it," he demanded, "you remembered you was getting a killer's caress?"

"A man's, cowboy," she told him jubilantly, eyes shining.

They sat in the doorway that night, watched the stars and sensed each other's presence. Once their hands touched, and fire ran between them, a dangerous quality. He was glad when she went to bed, and he spread his blankets before the door . . .

They were awake, giving no sign of light, in that dark hour before the dawn. "I'll saddle four horses," Frio said. He softly opened the door. Just for an instant, but enough for his keen eyes, he saw the faint glow of a concealed cigarette; at a point beyond the stable, near the creek.

"Easy," he cautioned her. Soundless as a phantom, he slipped out. It seemed ages to the waiting girl yet somehow she was not afraid for this Frio Lang. Her confidence in him was a deep abiding thing. Beyond the stable then, sounded the dull crack of a gun barrel on a man's skull. Still she waited. Shortly, Frio came up, leading four saddled mounts.

"I think," he said coldly, "that jasper won't wake up. One of the snakes that jumped you yesterday could tell by his clothes. Waiting for another crack at you, I guess. Let's go."

THE girl led the way; along the Bench toward the higher peaks. When daylight broke, they were in a high, wild country of rocky bluffs, blind canyons, heavy timber. And a roaring sound, that gradually increased, came to Frio's ears.

"Tornado River," Sally Tulare explained. She rode that way.

From high, glacier peaks, Tornado River boomed down toward the Bench and the Basin, to lose itself in a thousand smaller streams. Where the river thundered over a falls high above them, while spume plumed up. There was a stretch of smooth, swift-running water, and then the stream plunged into a gorge.

"This is the only place possible for one to get across," Sally told Frio. And added: "Few people will try it here. We'll leave the horses in the edge of the timber, here."

The horses hidden, they walked to the stream. She looked at Frio shyly. "It's hard enough for me to swim this with nothing on. I'll

have to—" She tilted her chin defiantly, sat down and pulled off her boots. Breeches and shirt followed, revealing a bathing suit which she had worn underneath.

Frio tied his boots around his neck, and left a stingy gun he carried in one of them. His throat felt dry as he went toward the girl, and the sight of her perfect young figure was an intoxicant to him. He reached for her, and she came into his arms.

His right hand slipped down her back, caressed its litheness; her firm little body seemed to throb against him. His left hand drew her head up to his; held it steady. Her lips were partly open, pressing frantically against his own. She whimpered in an ecstasy so great it was a pain.

"Frio!" she cried. "Frio!"

He tore himself way from her. "I must be mad," he panted, sweat glistening on his face. "Me, a killer, thinking of you, even."

She shook her head, her big eyes very wide. "This isn't the time for—love," she whispered. "Let's go, dear."

Without hesitation, she plunged into the stream. It grabbed at her, drew her rapidly down toward the gorge. Watching her, Frio knew moments of terrible fear. She swam strongly, choppily toward the other bank.

He yelled, then croaked with relief. She gained the other side and, dripping wet, clambered out and waved back at him. Frio plunged in. The shock of the icy water set him into a whirlwind of frantic, powerful strokes. She reached down to him when he gained the other side.

She had boots under a rock on this side, and put them on. Hand in his she led him into a boulder field that writhed from an ancient slide. A little canyon cut their path. Sally Tulare turned down it to the left, rounded a sharp turn, called out.

A pair of ancients, guns in hand, came off their haunches at a little campfire before a shallow cave. One was bald as an onion, while the other sprouted more whiskers than a bear. This one, Sally introduced as her uncle; the other was Paw Normandy.

"I'm all-damned glad to see you, Frio Lang," Code Cuyler said, when Sally had explained things to him. "The proof I got don't include Hack Tinchley, but we was afraid to trust anybody. It's all our scalps is worth—mine, not Paw's—to stick them out."

"Frio Lang," Paw mumbled. "You ain't that trouble-bustin' one, knowed from Texas to the Canadas as shoots so no questions is needed?"

"That's what they say." Frio turned to Cuyler. "This proof you got? It's what we need. Any excuse good enough, that'll make the State in the right in wiping Swan Yark out—with Tinchley's help."

CUYLER turned, went into the little cave. He came out and laid a little packet in Frio's hands. Frio untied it. A little book, used as a tally or brand book. He opened it. A signed check had been folded inside it.

"Whew!" He whistled shrilly. "Five hundred dollars to Red Saxon. Hell, was that low skunk in these parts?"

"Saxon took a shot at me. I shot back, with a rifle. And straighter. That check and book was on him. Swan Yark, as you can see, signed the check. In that book, Saxon had put down dates and names. On those dates, those names was kilt, or had beef slaughtered. Saxon's got his charge figgers all down. Five hundred worth."

"And Yark knows it?" Frio asked.

"He must, seein' as how he found Saxon soon after I kilt him. Nohow, me and Normandy had to cut and run for it and hide out."

"No wonder," Frio growled. "And it's what we need. Yark has earned a killing, this proves it—so a killing is what he'll get. Come on. We've got to get to Tinchley with this stuff."

At the river bank, Sally plunged into the stream. The three men turned to remove their boots. As Sally scrambled up the other bank, a scream burst past her lips. Swan Yark plunged out of the rocks, grabbed her, lifted her dripping, fighting little body in his arms and dived out of sight. A hail of lead rained as Yark's gunmen fired on Frio and the two old men, forcing them behind boulders edging the river on their side.

Cursing from the bottom of his heart, Frio hauled his stingy gun. For one of the few times in his life, he lost his head and leaped into full view.

"Get down, you damn' fool!" Code Cuyled yelled. "You can't help Sally by gettin' kilt."

Frio fought himself out of the grip of madness and dropped flat. Lead screeched and flattened against the rock.

"Don't think he'd dare hurt her," Normandy howled. "Like as not, he'll hold her to trade for the check and notebook."

"Then he can have them," Frio croaked. "And after she's safe, I'll kill him with my bare hands, anyhow."

A smashing blast of firing sounded across the river, yet no more shots came their way. Frio raised. "It's Tinchley and his boys! Damn 'em, give 'em hell!" he yelled.

A man leaped up over there. Frio's stingy-gun snarled. A stumble . . . A body swirling down the river into the gorge . . . The guns of Cuyler and Normandy joined in. From the timberline, Tinchley's men closed in, driving Yark's men out of the rocks toward the river. And lead sent them milling, falling. A handful left, threw away their guns and raised their hands. One after the other, Frio and Normandy and Cuyler swam over. While Frio hastily belted on his gun, Tinchley, a tall, saturnine man, exclaimed: "Yark's new gunnie, the Bucktooth Kid, killed two of my men today. Hell, that was cause enough to declare open war. We followed them, and they come here—"

"Yeah. Yeah," Frio cut in. "But where's Yark, and Sally?"

"Yark?" Tinchley looked around, blinking. "Hell! That's right. Yark *ain't* in this mess, is he?"

"No, damn him," one of the captives snarled. "He tailed it with the girl. I heard him yap at Utah Vonce, there—" nodding carelessly toward one of the dead men sprawled in the rocks—"he'd hold

her at John Freitas' cabin, and to meet him there. He—"

FRIO LANG, in long bounds was to his horse. There was confusion behind him, but he paid no heed. He hooked his horse with the spurs, driving out of there. And his face was not a pleasant thing to see. . .

Swan Yark's hawkish, dark face glistened with sweat and there was an animal glitter in his eyes. The slender, white figure in his arms inflamed him, made a beast of him. He pulled up before Freitas' cabin and hurled Sally Tulare to the ground, leaped down, snatching up her nearly unconscious form, carried her inside the place.

Wiped out! He cursed Tinchley, Frio Lang, the world entire. And Cuyler, damn him! He aimed to have this much revenge on the Cuyler blood before he fled this range: Sally Tulare.

The girl stirred and sobbed as he flung her on a rumpled bunk, tore off his jacket and stood over her. She cried out and tried to sit up as he bent down. His hands, hot, calloused, pressed her back, bruising her flesh cruelly. She fought him silently, hopelessly.

He put one knee on her left arm and pressed down heavily. She tried to fling herself aside. His strength held her helpless. His hot lips found her throat, her cheeks, her mouth, burning them. Her slender legs threshed madly, helplessly. Those hands of his—filling her with agonizing fear—he was merciless.

The girl screamed again. . .

The entire cabin seemed to rock, then. The brackets holding the bar in place, pulled loose with a screech of spikes. Frio Lang, a mad devil gone berserk, plunged headlong into the cabin, half fell across the room and landed atop Yark. A shriveling string of oaths streamed from his lips.

Fear, frustration marked Swan Yark. He twisted and flung a fist at Frio's distorted face. Frio grabbed the arm, turned. Yark went over his shoulder, spun across the cabin and crashed against the wall. Before he could get up, Frio was on him, the smacking, wet sounds of his fists sickening to hear.

Swan Yark fought back, fear giving him inhuman strength. He gained his feet, was driven into a corner, knocked to his knees. His own blows fell on Frio with no more effect than hailstones on a pond: Frio absorbed them just that way.

"Kill you — with my — bare hands!" Frio landed a blow with every word. Yark screamed past battered lips, put his arms before his face and dived headlong for the door. Until now, he'd had no chance to grab his gun. But as he bolted for outside, his hand slapped the butt of it. He hit the ground outside, twisted half around, went to one knee. Frio waited until Yark's gun was almost up . . . They fired almost together. But Frio fired first.

He turned slowly, chest heaving, closed the door. Crying silently, Sally was sitting up on the bunk. He picked her shaking, tender body up and held her on his lap. She ceased to cry. Her breath was in his ear, her arms around him. A dazed, lethargic feeling stole

over him and her flesh seemed to burn him.

Code Cuyler's voice hailed from outside.

"Damn!" Frio swore.

Sally smiled, grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around herself, and followed him to the door.

"Sally *'sta bueno,"* Frio told them. She stuck her head out under his right arm in proof of this.

"There's Yark," Frio said needlessly. "I guess my job up here is done."

"No it isn't," Sally whispered. To her uncle, she said:

"Uncle Code, will you ride home and bring me back some clothes?"

Code started to ask questions. Tinchley nudged him, and Paw Normandy growled: "Code, you fool! It'd be a blessin' if a man like Frio Lang'd stay hereabouts. Give the gal a chance to make him *want* to stay."

"Yeh. I'll go, Sally," Code agreed. "But meantime, how about you?"

Sally chuckled. "Never mind that. Frio will take care of me!"

They rode away—slowly. Frio closed the door.

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The May issue of Private Detective is on sale March 27

The June issue of Romantic Detective is on sale April 6

The July issue of Romantic Western is on sale May 6

By
JEAN BEAUMONT

STONE HADLEY placed another bet on the roulette table, watched as the white ball rolled and skipped around the wheel. He shrugged as the wheel stopped and took his loss with a smile. There were other forms of entertainment at Cantina *El Gato,* and the tall cowboy made his way to the back room to watch the dancers.

Beautiful, half-breed, border girls were going through the motions of dancing with cowboys who did not know how to dance. Knowing cowboys, Hadley smiled again. The idea of dancing was only incidental to most of them. They were hungry for feminine company, and *El Gato* picked his dance girls with a thought for his own profit, knowing that love-starved cowboys were always easy-going, easily lured into spending freely at the bar, or at the tables. They were willing to pay well for a senorita's smile.

Slender shapely legs clad in full-length hose of sheerest silk twinkled under the yellow lights. They did something to a man, those full-clad legs; were somehow far more exciting than stockings rolled down to show bare knees. *El Gato* gleaned his major profits from such subtle methods of feminine appeal.

There was no vulgar display of white flesh in this Cantina five miles below the Border. Each of the ten girls wore a short skirt, and a heavy silk blouse buttoned high at the throat. They were all attractive girls, young enough to enjoy the sort of life the Cantina offered, able to take care of themselves, and clever beyond reproach in their allure. Not cheap, not gaudy—but not prudes, by any yardstick.

The Mexican orchestra stopped playing and the dancers trooped up to the bar in the long saloon. *El Gato's* beauties were all hand-picked girls earning high wages. Two drinks per couple, at a dollar

UNDER WESTERN STARS

The girl he had saved clung to Hadley. "El Gato will kill you for sure, and it's all my fault!" she sobbed. But Hadley was not afraid.

"I do not like to be called The Cat," the Mexican whispered.

apiece, even if the girl's drink was only sweetened water, meant a dollar for the girl and a dollar for the house. Their duty was to keep the boys drinking, and beyond that duty, *El Gato* left them to their own devices.

STONE HADLEY shrugged restlessly and called a waiter to his table. "Whiskey straight; the kind your boss drinks," he ordered. "And tell *El Gato* I'd like to speak to him."

The liquor stood untasted before him when a tall slender man crossed the back room and took a chair opposite the cowboy. *El Gato* was the handsomest man along the Border, and he knew it. Women fought for his favor and added gold to his till. He had black curly hair above brown eyes that were always smiling. There was a suggestion of feline strength in every line of his graceful figure.

"*Senor* Hadley," he murmured softly, rolling his sibilants with the slight lisp of the true Latin. "You wished to see *El Gato?*"

The cowboy nodded. "Howdy, Cat," he murmured. "Drink?"

"Why not?" The Mexican smiled and raised a hand to signal the waiter. "What brings you to my *Casa?*" he asked softly.

The cowboy inclined his head toward the long bar. "You made another mistake, Cat," he stated quietly.

The Mexican stopped smiling and his dark eyes narowed. "The name is *El Gato,*" he corrected softly. "I do not like to be called . . . *'Cat!'* "

"Same thing," the cowboy answered with a careless shrug. "That new girl there at the end of the bar." He shook his head, "She don't belong here, and we both know it!"

"Old Jose, her father, brought her to me," the Mexican answered quietly. "He owes me two hundred pesos, and Conchita will work it out. After that she can return home." Once more he was smiling.

Hadley stared for a moment and reached to his hip-pocket with his left hand. He withdrew it slowly and placed five golden discs on the table in front of the slender Mexican. Then he raised the same hand and motioned to the little beauty at the end of the bar.

"The debt is paid, Cat," he murmured very softly. "Conchita goes back home with me."

El Gato sneered at the money and tightened his lips. A pretty girl of seventeen crossed the floor and stood behind the cowboy's chair, dark eyes wide with fear, rounded bosom heaving under the tight silk blouse.

"We are going home, Conchita," Hadley said quietly. "The debt your father owes is paid!"

"Gracias! Gracias!" the girl whispered tearfully. She moved closer to the tall cowboy while her brown eyes watched the face of *El Gato.*

"Don't thank me," Hadley grunted. "Carlos gave me the money. He waits for you outside."

"We are to be wed, Carlos and I," the girl whispered. "He would never marry me if I stayed so much as one night in this place." Her little hands gripped the cowboy's arm while her wide eyes still stared hypnotically at the handsome Mexican.

Hadley stood up and kicked back his chair. "You satisfied, Cat?" he asked quietly.

El Gato shrugged. *"Por que no?"* he murmured. "And why not, *senor?* There are many pretty girls who would be glad to work in the Cantina." But then his dark features changed, and his voice was suddenly harsh, "I warn you, Hadley. I do not like to be called . . . *The Cat!"*

Stone Hadley flipped back his coat and shadowed the heavy gun on his right leg with a strong brown hand. "You are a cat," he said slowly. "And I never did like cats none to speak of. Well?"

Lightning flashed briefly in the brown eyes across the table. But, after an instant, *El Gato* shrugged again and picked up the gold pieces.

"Adios, vaquero," he murmured softly. "Perhaps I should say . . . *Hasta la vista!"*

He turned abruptly on his heel and crossed the room to disappear through the door of his private office. The frightened girl clung to Hadley, trembling.

"You heard him, *senor?"* she whispered. "He said: 'Till we meet again.' He will kill you for sure, and it's all my fault!"

Hadley smiled and nodded toward a side door. "Carlos waits," he answered. "Shall we go now?"

Three horses were tied at the rail just outside the door. When Hadley led the girl out, a slender figure rushed forward and caught Conchita in eager arms. Excited happy voices blended together for a brief moment and then the boy held the girl at arm's length, and grimaced wryly.

"I do not like these clothes, Conchita," Carlos whispered hotly, and pointed to a bundle behind one of the saddles. "We will wait while you slip back there in the shadows and change!"

DARK glowing eyes watched from a darkened window as Conchita's slender figure disappeared in the shadow of a pepper tree. Eyes that grew fiery as a cloud slid from under the moon for a revealing moment showing the startled girl poised like a fawn about to flee while the soft light painted her beautiful figure with warm silver tints.

Her brown eyes flashed instinctively to the high window and caught the sheen of moonlight on two glistening sparks. Shame stained her face, and she turned her back, hastily donning the shirt and overalls Carlos had brought. She stomped into the tiny high-heeled boots with a little sob of anger tearing at her throat.

"He can see in the dark like a cat," she remembered, but when she turned again to search the darkened window, the glittering twin sparks were gone.

"Andale," Carlos called impatiently. "We must hurry, Conchita!"

The girl said nothing of the hidden watcher as she mounted her horse and rode across the cactus-studded prairie with Hadley and Carlos. Her sweetheart would try to kill *El Gato,* if he knew, and she shuddered as she remembered the graves of other men who had tried to match guns with the tall gam-

bler. Carlos spoke softly as though he read her thoughts.

"Some day there will come a man who is faster," he murmured. "*Por Dios,* hasten the day!"

Stone Hadley rode slightly in the lead, and he turned now in the saddle, speaking softly. "That man is not you, Carlos. *El Gato* is fast with a sixgun, and tricky as well. Better wait until that other hombre rides down across the Border!"

"It is as you say, *senor,*" the Mexican boy murmured. "I am only the poor cowboy working for you." His voice changed to an anxious note. "We cannot take Conchita home now," he fretted.

Hadley smiled in the moonlight and pointed to a long lane of cottonwoods. "We will take her to the Box O," he answered. "Molly O'Day will find a place for her until you are ready to ask for the *padre's* blessing."

LIGHTS burned brightly in the deep windows when the three riders stopped beside the broad porch of an old adobe ranch house. A deep girlish voice called from a swing, back in the shadows, as Hadley swung down from his horse and mounted the steps.

"You ride late, Stone. Won't you sit a spell?"

"Figgered you'd be up, Molly," the cowboy answered with a chuckle. "I brought Conchita over to stay with you and help you with your work."

A little hand moved out from the shadows, caught Hadley's arm. Mollie pulled him down on the swing beside her. The pressure of her fingers seemed to increase, lingered even after he had seated himself.

"It's Conchita Morales," he explained in a whisper. "She was working off a debt in *El Gato's* Cantina down there below the line. Carlos paid the debt, and I brought her here."

"Why, of course," the wondering girl murmured, and raising her voice, she called to the other girl on horse-back, "You remember the room you had before, Conchita?"

"*Si, senorita,*" the Mexican girl answered. "It was heaven the two weeks I work for you."

"You will find it ready," the Box O mistress went on. "I'll talk to you in the morning." She leaned closer to Hadley as Carlos and Conchita rode across the yard. "Please explain, Stone," she murmured. "You usually have a good reason for any queer actions."

Stone Hadley stirred uncomfortably as he felt the beat of her heart against his shoulder. "If you didn't own the Box O," he growled under his breath, "the biggest ranch along the Border, and me with my little old S bar H outfit. . . !" He left his statement unfinished.

The girl beside him sighed and moved away. "I wish I were like Conchita," she murmured. "But just because I own the Box O, it seems my lot to be unhappy."

"About Conchita," the cowboy interrupted gruffly. "You and I know what it would mean if she stayed a month at that Cantina down there. So I rode across with Carlos and paid the debt her father owed. Knew you'd find a place for her, just like I knew you'd understand and play up without ask-

While she changed, she caught a glimpse of glowing eyes.

ing too many questions. So I brought her here until Carlos saves enough money to get married."

MOLLY O'DAY reached out and took his hand. "Carlos won't wait very long," she whispered. "Perhaps long enough to repay you and earn five dollars for the *padre*. Then he'll take Conchita, and they'll both be happy. Why can't we be like them?"

Hadley stretched to his feet and moved out of the shadows. "I'd do the same if I had my spread paid for," he muttered.

He turned his head when the girl followed him. She cupped his chin in her tanned hands. Molly was wearing a heavy blue silk skirt buttoned high at the throat. He

caught his breath when his eyes fell to the swelling curves of her figure, moulding against the smooth cloth like chiseled marble.

"I wish you wouldn't wear that shirt, Molly," he muttered harshly. "That's the kind of outfit *El Gato* makes his dance-hall girls wear!"

"Stone! Are you comparing me with those half-breed girls?"

"Sorry, little pard, I didn't mean that," the tall cowboy whispered contritely, and for a moment he forgot himself, the inequality of their positions in life, and caught the girl in his arms.

Molly was twenty . . . and lonely. She tried to stem the hot tears that welled up in her blue eyes, and buried her face in the hollow of his shoulder when she failed. Hadley quivered like a tree in a mountain storm and he closed his eyes as long pent-up emotion robbed him of his native caution. He held Molly close to his heart, his head buried in her soft black curls, his whispered words unintelligible and almost mournful.

The moon slipped behind the high Guadalupes to leave only the soft glow of the southern stars. Night birds called sleepily and the world seemed to stand still . . . For a long moment he held her close to him, thrilling to the softness of her slender body pressed so warmly to him. Then he thrust her almost roughly from him.

"I forgot," he murmured and dropped his arms.

"I want you to forget," the girl almost sobbed. Then her voice rose higher and hysterically she beat against his broad chest with her tiny fists. "I hate you, Stone Hadley!" she gasped. "You are as cold and hard as your name. Some day you'll be sorry that you put your pride before . . . happiness!"

Hadley answered heavily. "I'd die for you, Molly. I reckon you know it."

"I don't want you to die for me," the girl almost snarled at him. "I want you to *live* for me, but you live only for your false pride. You might just as well go, and don't you dare come back here until you learn as much about people as you know about cattle!"

Stone Hadley stood there in the star-light, a stricken expression on his tanned face. He watched silently, grimly as Molly ran across the broad gallery and darted into the old house, slamming the door after her. Then he stumbled down the steps and mounted his horse, and he did not even notice that Carlos left the shadows and rode after him.

A WEEK passed, and on the little S Bar H cattle ranch nestling back in the foothills of the Guadalupe mountains, Stone Hadley rode from daylight until dark, working hard, trying to forget the hurt that lurked deep in his wide gray eyes, and the gnawing yearning in his heart. He was stripping his riding gear by the horse barn when Carlos spurred into the yard and threw himself from the saddle, words screaming from his twisting lips.

"They are gone, *senor!* That damn' devil of a cat has taken them!"

Hadley caught the Mexican cowboy by the shoulders and shook him until Carlos winced with pain. "Now talk sense," he grunted sternly. "The cat got who?"

"Conchita, *senor,*" the cowboy moaned. "*El Gato* has taken her back to his cantina!"

"Just a moment, *vaquero.*" Hadley's face was pale. "You said he had taken . . . *them!*"

"*Si, senor,*" the cowboy chattered. "He have taken the *Senorita* Molly also," and then he became suddenly calm and raised his dark eyes to Hadley's stern face. "Perhaps that hombre ride across the border now, *senor?*" he suggested. "That one you say is faster than *El Gato?*"

Hadley dropped his hands, his lips became a thin slash across his tanned face. "Rope out a fresh hoss," he growled savagely. "That hombre you spoke about never did like cats. You and me are going to trail the daddy of them all!"

THE two silent riders stopped their horses in the shadows of a prickly-pear thicket. Carlos was almost crying with fear for the little Mexican girl he loved. Hadley was steady as a rock, his features seemingly chiseled from the same hard piece. There was no tremor in his deep voice when he loosened his gun in its holster and spoke to his companion.

"*El Gato* will be expecting us, Carlos. You will do as I say without question, *amigo?*"

"Tell me, *senor,*" the boy answered quietly. "A man can die but once, and I would not want to live without Conchita!"

"That goes double," Hadley growled softly under his breath, and he straightened his broad shoulders. "You will sing loudly when you ride up to the Cantina alone," he continued sternly.

"Alone?" Carlos jerked around in his carved saddle. "You said alone, *senor?*"

Hadley bobbed his head. "Keep your hands up and you will be safe," he continued sternly. "Do what *El Gato* tells you to do, and leave the rest to me. I will follow you in fifteen minutes!"

The Mexican cowboy crossed himself and took a deep breath. "It shall be as you say, *senor.* I go!"

He straightened his shoulders and tried to assume a bravery he did not feel. He rode out across the strip of sand under the star-light, a Spanish song wavering from his lips, and then his voice grew steadier as the wind from the mountains blew across his fevered face. He was humming softly when he slid from his saddle in front of the Cantina and shouldered his way slowly through the slatted doors.

He took three steps into the saloon before he stopped. His dark eyes blinked rapidly against the yellow lights. Something hard and cold pressed against his spine, and his two hands shot up shoulder-high as a soft voice whispered in his ear.

"You have made the mistake, *peon!* You should have brought the great Stone Hadley when you dare enter the Cantina of *El Gato!*"

Carlos stiffened and then turned slowly. "Conchita," he whispered, with a catch in his voice. "I love her, *Senor El Gato.* You would not do such a thing!"

The tall Mexican stepped back and holstered the long-barreled gun on his slender leg. "Conchita came here to work for me," he

murmured softly, and pointed to the dance hall in the rear. "You come alone, hombre?"

Carlos caught his breath when he saw Conchita staring at him. The fear of death was in her soft brown eyes. He tore his gaze away from her face and turned to answer the tall gambler.

"But yes, *senor*. I am but the *pobre vaquero*."

"Poor cowboys are not welcome here," the gambler answered coldly. "Back against that wall, and if you so much as move one finger . . !"

The trembling cowboy backed up to the wall, trying to keep his eyes from the dance hall. The gambler watched him with a smile while Carlos searched for some sign of the American girl. Then *El Gato* nodded his black head as the cowboy's shoulders drooped.

"You seek some one else?" he asked, softly.

Carlos jerked his head up. "What other?" he countered.

A STRONG hand shot out and fastened on his throat. "Don't lie to me, *paisano*," the gambler murmured, and tightened the grip of his steely fingers. "Now tell me who you were expecting to find beside Conchita!"

Carlos rubbed his bruised throat, swallowed hard, breathed with difficulty. "Old Jose, her father, perhaps," he whispered hoarsely. "He that they call *El Borrachon!*"

El Gato smiled and curled his lip. "A knife would be better," he murmured, suggestively. "We always use the knife for those who lie!"

"But Jose Morales, he is the drunkard," Carlos faltered. "He would do anything for the drink!"

The tall gambler stepped back and spread long legs wide, his polished boots reflecting the yellow lights. Brown eyes fixed steadily on the sallow face of the fear-stricken cowboy. Carlos raised his head and met *El Gato's* gaze.

"I have insulted you, my friend," the gambler began smoothly. "It is regret that I have done so, and I hasten to make amends. I would kill you if you did the same to me, and you have the gun on your leg!"

Carlos shrank back against the wall, his dark eyes widening. "But no, *senor*," he stammered. "You are the fastest man of our race with a sixgun. It would be murder, *senor!*"

"But I have insulted you," the gambler repeated. "I have taken the girl who was to be your wife." He leaned closer. "You remember that other time she was here?" he asked softly.

The Mexican cowboy nodded silently. "She changed her clothing back there under the pepper tree," the gambler whispered. "It was very dark, and there was I watching from my window."

The cowboy clenched his teeth for a moment, and his shoulders sagged again. "But it was dark," he muttered.

El Gato smiled. "You forget that the moon came up," he reminded. "She was lovely, your Conchita. Standing there in the moonlight like a beautiful statue of white marble!"

Carlos straightened suddenly, and snarled like a cornered wolf. Anger distorted his brown face when the full import of the gambler's words sank into his brain.

Now he was leaning forward in a crouch, lips skinned back to show strong white teeth grinding together.

"Draw!" he snarled. "One of us must die!"

"One of us should," the gambler agreed with a slow smile, and elbowed back the fringe of his silken sash. "After you, *amigo!*"

The Mexican cowboy poised his hand for the draw, and then his fingers began to tremble. "Shoot," he whispered. "Me, I am not *rapido.* Shoot quickly, *cabrone!*"

El Gato whipped out with his left hand and slapped the staring cowboy across the mouth. "Draw!" he grunted. "You can at least die like a man!"

Carlos crouched forward, eyes staring into the dance hall at the rear. The tall gambler curled slender fingers around the ivory handle of his gun. A sneering smile spread on his dark face. He caught a glint of hope in Carlos' eyes and turned his head to follow the cowboy's stare. His hand fell slowly from his weapon.

"Stone Hadley!"

The words ripped from his thin lips when a tall figure side-stepped from the dance-hall to set his back against the arch leading to the saloon. Hadley's gray eyes stared coldly at the startled gambler, and both hands came up to hook in the gunbelt around his lean hips.

"I warned you, Cat," he said slowly, "about making the same mistake twice!"

The gambler wet his lips and shrugged his slender shoulders. "You are not in your country, *senor,*" he answered softly. "But like all gringos, you sneak in the back way."

Hadley nodded his head. "I came through your private office, Cat," he said clearly. "And I found what I wanted to know."

THE dancers crouched against the walls, fear mirrored in their eyes. Cowboys from the other side of the border; wealthy Mexican ranchers with money to spend. They all knew *El Gato* and his wizardry with a sixgun. Just as they knew Stone Hadley, and the cringing cowboy he had saved from death.

"You came through my office?" and the gambler's dark eyes narrowed, became steely. "One of us must die, *senor,*" he whispered through the crack of tight lips.

Hadley nodded his head. "Your deal," he said, quietly.

The gambler's right hand moved like a flash of lightning as trained fingers curled around the grip of his gun. Hadley twitched his shoulder and dipped his hand down with the speed of a hawk in flight. His thumb caught the filed hammer on the draw and slipped it when the glinting muzzle snouted over the lip of his holster. Just the wink of an eye ahead of the powder-flash that was like a reflection of his own shot.

El Gato jerked back under the impact of the heavy bullet that sent a scarlet banner waving in the folds of his white silk shirt. His smoking gun was pointing at the floor between his polished boots where his wasted slug had tunneled a passage. Then he swayed like a reed in the wind. Carlos watched with mouth open as the tall gambler bent at the knees and coiled to the sawdust like a worn rope.

The Mexican cowboy crossed

himself reverently and shook his head. "One of us had to die," he murmured, and hurried to his boss.

"Get Conchita," Hadley said evenly. "And wait for me by the pepper tree."

He holstered his gun and crossed the dance hall to the door of the gambler's private office. Hadley entered the room and closed the door behind him. He stood motionless in the darkness until a pair of soft rounded arms found him. Then he closed his arms, with a sob, around the supple body of Molly O'Day.

"Molly, girl," he whispered huskily. "I nearly lost you because of my pride. Will you marry me right away?"

He felt the throbbing beat of a heart when the girl pressed closer to him, and he knew that warm red lips were tilted up, seeking his, lips that would no longer be denied. And once again Stone Hadley forgot the world and the limitations of time when he answered that unspoken plea.

"Lover," a husky voice sobbed happily. "I knew you would come to me when you learned more about a woman's heart. Are you quite sure now?"

"Positive, Molly," the cowboy whispered against her cheek. "But it took a cat to teach me!"

Molly shook her head. "It was the stars," the girl corrected, and pointed through the window where Carlos and Conchita were silhouetted against the sky. "Everyone feels it down here," she continued, and sighed from the haven of his arms. "It's the treasure one finds . . . under southern stars!"

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It will appear in the July issue of

ROMANTIC WESTERN

on sale at all newsstands May 6

The girl shivered and moaned as he stormed out with her.

Snaketrack Town

INDIAN Summer had come to this Montana range, cloaking the Big Torment Mountains in a lazy, smoky haze. A country of peace and beauty, outwardly; yet hidden behind this tranquil mantle, death and trouble poised—ready to fling forth into a bloody fandango, with guns as castanets.

Bill "Siesta" Frey put his horse across a lush, foothill meadow and rode into a grove of quaking aspen,

By LAWTON JAMESON

on the other side of which a cabin stood. Beyond the cabin, the mountains reared high, sheer, forbidding. A notch between two towering, rocky peaks let blue sky show through.

"It matches Red Yates' description of the place," Siesta mumbled, a pleased expression on his face. "Bet Red'll be some surprised, to see me show up so soon."

He broke through the grove into the cabin clearing, suddenly tightening on the reins. The deceptively sleepy, slouched way of him vanished instantly. A woman had stepped out of the cabin, her walk angry, choppy. She picked up the reins of her ground-tied horse, prepared to mount.

Though she danced in the saloon, he sensed she didn't belong there. Yet one look at her costume and he said: "She's like that woman, Godiva. All she needs is a horse and some guns to protect her!" And Siesta dealt himself in for the job

A man came out behind her, his face, stubbled with dirty beard, twisting harshly. To Siesta, sitting statuesque, unseen, the fellow's raucous, heated voice was very clear.

"An' who in hell are *you,* to think you're too good for Ace Padus?" he yapped, seizing the woman and yanking her around. She made no sound, tried to get her arms up between them as this man, Ace Padus, hugged her to him.

His hands, around her waist, pulled her closer; her struggles caused the short skirt she wore to wrinkle, slip higher, revealing sheer silk stockings above the short tops of her riding boots. Well-filled stockings—something to hold a man's eye—as the skirt came higher—higher still.

"Damn your low soul!" she cursed. She kicked, catching him on the shins. Padus snarled curses, shifted, caught a hand in the red silk blouse she wore. It ripped halfway down the side. Siesta caught a glimpse of white skin that gleamed enticingly.

"Look at me, if you think it'll do you any good," she snarled at Padus, clawing viciously at his face. He reached for her again—missed. The woman leaped back, hitting at him tigerishly. She tripped and fell, flat on her back—a flurry of white underthings and long legs waving helplessly. Padus laughed and tumbled after her.

"AN' THAT'LL be hell's plenty!" Frey roared.

The movement as he lunged his horse ahead, was far from a sluggish one. His right hand dropped, wristed up, his gun was clear.

Ace Padus leaped, whirled to his feet. Surprise twisted his unlovely face. Then rage replaced that look.

"Claw a cloud," Siesta rapped, the hammer of his six-gun clicking ominously. Shaking, mouthing low oaths, Padus elevated his dirty hands.

The woman sat up, her torn blouse gaping, hastily pulled down the rumpled skirt to cover the white curves of her legs. There was no fear, nothing but cooling anger in her manner and expression. Her lips were full, too red, and there was a low-lidded, come-and-get-me drooping of her eyes.

"Thanks, stranger," she said, getting up. "You didn't save very much. But I'm thankful, anyhow. Guess you did this poor fool a favor, horning in. If he'd gone too far, Butch Cring'd rubbed his mark."

"Like hell!" Padus croaked. "Butch's too busy makin' a play fer that new heifer in Stonehouse. He—"

"Shut your blab," she warned, eyeing him meaningfully. She turned to Siesta. "Forget all this. He just lost his head." She grinned, fully aware that her tattered shirt only half concealed her lovely body.

"Would you lose your head over me, cowboy?" she hummed.

Siesta assumed his sleepy look. He yawned. "Wouldn't even be interested a teeny-weeny bit," he grunted. He saw the hate, the burning anger that flared in her eyes. He chuckled to himself.

"You can roll your hoop," Padus growled. "I'll overlook the fact you threw down on me. Ain't many do that to Ace Padus, an' get by with it."

"You'll forgive me!" Siesta hoorawed. "I'll remember, an' keep my back covered up. An' if you're sure you're through playin', might be you could tell me where Red Yates' spread is?"

Ace Padus stiffened, his eyes nearly closed, and for some odd reason, he seemed fired with desire to make a play for his gun.

"Ace!" the woman snapped. She glared up at Siesta. "You a friend of Yates?" she demanded.

"A friend an' pardner," Siesta grunted. "Red left Wyomin' to stake a place up here. I stayed on, to make a few wages to sort of back the deal."

He did not see fit to tell them his wages were top-gun wages in a range war between small ranchers and a syndicate. Nor that the small ranchers had rightly won out, because of Siesta's gun.

Ace started to speak. The woman cut him off. "Seems I've heard of a Red Yates," she said. "But not around here. You'd be more likely to pick him up in Stonehouse; or hear of him. I'm going there. Come on."

Siesta grinned; but it was a grin lacking mirth. He had a strong sense of something wrong. He knew not what. What sort of hand was being dealt? he wondered. Well, one way to find out: follow this woman to Stonehouse and sit in the game. He had to find Red Yates.

The woman mounted her horse. Looking quickly at Ace Padus, Siesta caught a sneering grin on that one's unlovely face.

"Next time, Ace," the woman snapped, "I come out to bring you news—I mean newspapers, and supplies, you behave yourself. Come on, cowhand. Stonehouse is around these foothills, about six miles."

FOR awhile they rode in silence, and then the woman rode close to him, until her full, rounded leg

brushed against his. Something ran through Siesta, like a small ripple of fire. He leaned, his arms swept around her and his lips pressed savagely to hers. With a hoarse laugh, he straightened in his saddle and looked at her.

"Huh-hell, cowboy!" she panted. "You do things to me."

"Not any more than that," he taunted.

Her eyes got hard, obsidian. "Damn you," she snarled. "There's plenty would crawl for Kit Teague."

"Yeah? Well, friend Padus, back there—"

"Ace is just a gun-flinging, empty-headed fool," she spat.

"And this Butch Cring?"

"*You'll* likely find out!" She kicked her horse into a run.

They came, then, into more rising foothills, and, where they broke away to form a little flats, there Stonehouse lay. A glance sufficed to cover it entirely; and being trouble wise, Siesta catalogued it properly: A snaketrack town.

There was the squatting, brown sandstone saloon and trading house that got this place its name. A dozen horses were tied to the cottonwood poles that supported the roof of the porch.

There were a few mud-and-pole cabins, a corral—and an air of sullen silence over all.

Kit Teague swung off her horse onto the porch, cast a venomous backward look at Siesta, swung inside the Stonehouse. A long, lazy gait moved Siesta swiftly after her—though it seemed he loafed along. Inside this place, a buzz of talk, activity at the bar on one side, the store counter on the other, the poker tables—everything suspended when Siesta came in. A humped-up man at a piano toward the rear, broke off suddenly, swung on his stool.

Frank, vicious, open hostility was the reception order here. And doubtful if a face among that hard-case, salty bunch that did not adorn wanted posters from Here to Hell-angone.

Siesta yawned, stretched, went to the bar. "Old Crow, Fat," he said.

"My name ain't 'Fat'," the lardy barkeep yapped in a high-pitched voice.

"Whiskey—*Fat!*"

The barkeep looked straight into Siesta's cattish eyes. "Yuh-yessir. Whiskey." He set a glass and bottle on the bar. Siesta poured his drink, hooked elbows up with his back to the bar and looked lazily around. In the rear, Kit Teague was seated at a table with three men; men these other wire-edged sons seemed to respect and leave strictly alone.

"That big one with two guns, the meaty red face with the scar on the cheek—that'd be Butch," Siesta allowed. "Brand fits. And them other two ain't no examples of what kids grow up to be when they go to Sunday School, I bet!"

KIT TEAGUE was talking rapidly, and now Butch Cring pushed back his chair and swaggered toward Siesta. His thick lips curled as he stopped and looked Siesta up and down.

Siesta raised his glass and over the rim of it, looked unperturbed at Cring. Cring turned his head. "Kid, Traub," he grunted.

The Kid, a thin-faced, chinless man who affected black pants and

shirt, and toted two bone-handled guns, came forward with the other man, Traub. Traub was ape-bodied, monkey-faced, with enormous hands and long arms.

They stopped beside Butch Cring.

"Anybody know this ranny?" Cring snorted. "Anybody invite him here."

"Not us," the Kid growled.

"Who in hell are you, guy?" Cring demanded.

"I'm a brush-popping vinegaroon from places that'd be too tough for you," Siesta drawled. "And I'm hunting a man named Yates—Red Yates."

"So Kit told me. An' I'm tellin' you, there ain't no Red Yates around these parts. Take your drink an' light a shuck."

"You knew Red," Siesta said low, his voice steely. "I aim to stick around until I find him. And after that, if I want to."

He was attracted by a movement throughout Stonehouse. A girl was coming from a room in the rear—and such a girl as Siesta had never expected to see. He leaned in a breathless way, his eyes running over every perfect line of her exquisite little body. Of that, there was plenty to be seen.

Some sort of filmy drape seemed all she wore, and she seemed very uncomfortably conscious of the fact. She paused, wide eyes on Siesta, a slender hand pressing above the young bosom nearly all-apparent through her gauzy costume. He seemed to leap out at her; a hard, capable, yet decent sort among this mangy pack of backtrail running snakes. Slow red rose into her heart-shaped little face.

She tossed her head, then and went on toward the piano.

"What the hell?" Siesta thought. "What's a girl like her doing in a place like this? In that outfit? Something haywire as hell. I bet!"

He turned to Cring, and caught the heated, wolfish look on that one's face. Cring licked his lips as he watched the girl. "I'll stay as long as I want," Siesta growled. "And now I think I want to stay for quite a spell."

Cring cursed, and the trio turned their attention back to Siesta. He grinned thinly and broadly, and his right hand, thrust under his double-breasted shirt, came halfway out. A .45 stingy-gun was gripped in that hand.

Cring stiffened, but there was no fear in him. Just caution, and a desire to let things ride and get back near that girl.

"You'll find no Red Yates," he said again. "Try it. An' then high-tail." He turned, jerked his head at Kid and Traub and stalked back toward his table. A splotch-faced, stringy, jittery man, who'd stood nearby, all ears, stood in Cring's way. Cring raised his right knee, slammed that man, Kinky Weems, in the stomach, then kicked him viciously toward the door.

Weems sobbed and gagged and blood was on his lips. And there was stark, savage murder contorting his sickly face as he half fell out through the doorway.

Siesta's jaw tightened, then relaxed. The piano tinkled, men left off whatever they were doing and stood in heated, rigid attitudes.

The girl in the filmy garb began to dance.

THERE was something clean about her; young and desirable. Siesta felt his palms go moist, his heart thump as he watched her sway slowly. Watched the rise and fall of her bosom and the press of shapely legs through her diaphanous drapes. She moved toward Butch Cring's table, seductive, causing him to lean and grab at her. She laughed, moved just out of his reach.

The music beat faster and she whirled, giving glimpses of white, soft flesh. Cring motioned to her, yelling, stamping his feet. Siesta looked at Kit Teague; saw her lean and snarl at Cring. A backhand slap brought blood from Kit Teague's lips and stopped that play.

Slowly, she got up, moved away down the far side of the room.

"Celia Luane! Celia Luane!" the pack was calling.

"Shut up!" Cring bellowed orders to the room. And not a man of them got fancy back at him. Siesta figured he savvied why Cring had not pressed a play at him: Cring gave orders here. He could take his time, without too many chances involved.

Celia Luane went over, sat down at Cring's table. Siesta frowned. It seemed as though her gaiety were forced, and that back of her smile were distaste, loathing, hate.

"Hell," he mumbled. "Whatever her game is, it's none of mine." He spun on one heel, and conscious of hostile eyes on him, strode out. "She's like that woman, Godiva," he growled. "All—about—she needs now is a horse. And some guns to protect her, if she keeps on here. I bet!"

Down the street, Kinky Weems sat on a horse trough and splashed water on his face. Siesta went that way. The man looked up, slid to his feet sideways and shook his head.

"Hold 'er," Siesta rapped. "You're going to tell me things."

"People don't say nothin' 'bout that so-damned Butch!" the man snarled. Hate contorted his face.

"You will. You hate his guts, and you figure I might put daylight into them. I will, maybe. But it ain't Cring I want to know about now. It's Red Yates."

Weems caught his breath. He coughed, turned again to the trough. "I ain't got so long, an' Cring has kicked me around all over hell. So—hell, here goes! Red Yates, feller, is up the trail there, under them trees. Boothill. Yeah."

Siesta sucked his breath hissingly inward. Red, the hoorawing, happy partner—

"Go on!" he snarled. Weems blinked at this savagery and stepped back. "Sheriff Wade, down at Halfway, was makin' 'er hot for Butch. Up in the notch, Butch has a cabin, hidden in. An' a way of runnin' cattle on across the Torments. He runs off beef from Halfway ranchers. Sabe."

"Go on. Get it out."

"Well, this Yates come in, homesteaded, got the place below the notch in the mountains. Spoiled Butch's chances of comin' through there an' vanishin' cows in thin air. Yates stood up to Butch, an' so, one evenin' here in Stonehouse, the Kid called Yates, shot him. It

was raw." He nodded. "Raw, because that hellcat, Kit, made up to Yates, got him some likkered. Butch jumped him for it, then sicked the Kid on him. Then, Ace Padus comes out an' says he had bought in with Yates. Showed a paper."

"That's a damned forgery. Red wouldn't—never mind. Padus is Butch's watchdog, there where I met him, on mine and Red's place. What would this Teague woman be taking him? What sort of news?"

"When Butch an' his men hunker here in town a day-two, you can bet some cows, a bank, or somethin' will catch hell nearby."

Weems was moving away. Siesta called "This Luane woman?"

"Don't know. Nobody can touch her. She's got Butch loco, an' Kit ready to tear her apart. Come here two weeks ago. Good hell! ain't you satisfied?"

"No," said Siesta. "Damned if I am."

HE TURNED, angled across the twilight-cloaked road and to a fly-blown little restaurant, acutely aware of Butch Cring coming from the Stonehouse across the way. A couple of tables and a counter with four stools was the size of the hashery. His attention keen and drawn out toward Cring, Siesta sat at the counter.

Not until he half turned on the stool did he see Celia Luane, who was at the far table, drawn against the wall, as though she would avoid detection. Again their eyes met, probed, and they looked guiltily away from each other.

Cring slammed in, glowered, snarled "Thought I told you to leave town?"

"To hell with you. And when I'm done putting on the *morale,* I'll be waiting for you, outside. Red Yates—" he shoved the words through set teeth—"needs company in Boothill. Not that you'll be good company. But you'll do. I bet!"

The cold way of him drew the color from Butch's face. He was careful to hold his hands away from his belt. "Y-you talk too much with your mouth," he ground out, turning toward the girl.

"And've been known to make gun talk, too," Siesta jeered.

Butch leaned over Celia Luane. Siesta saw her recoil. He spoke, "Miss, if he bothers you—"

"Mr. Cring is—is my friend," she gave back.

"Some people do have the strangest tastes. I bet!" he said.

Cring spun to face him, and there would have been a killing there in another moment. Cring could no longer control himself. The front door spanked inward, and Traub came in. He glared at Siesta, jerked his head at Butch, who followed him outside.

Celia Luane said low, urgently: "Please, please don't interfere. You don't understand."

Siesta shrugged, frowned, shook his head. He opened his mouth to speak. From up the street, the bark of a six-gun laid a stopper to his words. His bootheels rapped smartly, and he drew his six-gun as he went outside, hugging the side of the building as he peered into the dark.

He went swiftly up the sidewalk path toward the watering trough, then was on his knees. Kinky

Weems lay sprawled there on his back. His eyes showed whitely and there were dark stains on his chest. Kinky Weems was dead.

"I saw you talkin' to him, an' now the same dose to you!" Traub's raucous voice sounded to Siesta's right. A gun lashed fire through the gloom as Siesta dropped flat. The lead smacked the soaked wood of the trough with a soggy sound. Rolling again, Siesta got the trough between himself and Traub, who was in a doorway a few yards on up.

He raised, spaced his shots with vicious deliberation, and when that was done, drew his stingy-gun and fired three times more. A wild scream, a blubbery "Ahhhh, my stomach—my—"

"Buttonholes in your belly!" Siesta rapped as Traub came falling out of the doorway onto his face.

Up and down the street, doors and windows came open, banged shut. This was a fight of Butch Cring's, and nobody else wanted any part of it.

Back by the restaurant, another gun commenced to beat, and Siesta had a glimpse of Butch as he leaped behind baled hay piled in front of Stonehouse, across the street.

Siesta filled his guns, came to his feet and made for the darkness where the street dwindled into a trail that ran into the hills. He cut around an empty shack, ran along the scant buildings, and came out between a couple of cabins near the restaurant. A horse, pawing, snorting, pulled at a tierack there. Men were running, yelling, and Siesta heard Butch offering a hundred dollars for his hide.

He kept low, went quickly to the horse and cut the reins. A slap of his hat and he ducked back again. The horse thundered out of Stonehouse, going away from the yelling men.

"He's forkin' hide," someone cried. More loud voices, that gradually faded.

"That's one, Red," Siesta growled, working back behind the town. "And I got me a hunch that Celia Luane can tell me the exact set-up here. I am going to know what she meant in the restaurant. She ain't right for the part she's playing. I aim to know." He commenced working his way around so he could come up on the Stonehouse from the rear.

INSIDE Stonehouse, Butch stared into his whiskey glass, a harsh scowl on his face. "Traub was a good one, damn that sleepy looking devil!"

"He ain't so sleepy," Kit Teague said, shifting her chair around. "And there was no proof that sickly Kinky told anything."

Butch's eyes narrowed. He looked at the Kid, and then at Kit. "No," he growled. "Maybe not. It might be that you done it, Kit. You jealous fool!"

He moved his chair back. The woman's face went white.

"Butch stop it!" she begged. "You know better. If you want to know—what about this Luane heifer? You stayed here in Stonehouse, keeping Kid and Traub with you, when all of you should've been with the rest of your boys, getting that herd from over by Halfway.

"The boys was due back before daylight this morning. Yet Padus had no word from them. You been

drunk around here on account of her, ain't you? And when you get drunk, you get mouthy."

"I should oughta kill you for that," Butch rasped. But she could see the idea was working on him. And other things were coming back to him; things of the past two weeks since this Celia Luane had come to drive him wild.

The way she held him off, then teased him on; the sly questions she had asked, offering promises to him later . . .

"Damn you!" he cursed Kit Teague. He kicked over his chair, snarled something unintelligible and went toward the rear. He didn't knock on the door of the little room set aside for Celia Luane. He turned the knob, strode in and slammed the door behind him.

The girl leaped from a chair beside a small table, holding a flimsy kimono tightly about her. Butch Cring stopped, his greedy eyes searching that curved, luscious figure.

"Bu—Butch!" She tried to sound scolding, more than afraid. "What does this mean?"

"It means," Butch snarled, "you've fooled me long enough. All this time you been leadin' me on, an' me getting nowhere. You've asked a lot of questions—"

"Butch. Butch!" Kit burst into the room, Ace Padus and Kid behind her. "Never mind the play here, Butch. Ace's got news of the bunch."

PADUS, face strained, pushed forward. "Butch, Nevada Jones come to the place awhile ago, an' he was ridin' like all hell. He packed his stuff an' tailed on again. Butch—" Padus licked dry lips—"when the bunch started to run off that gathered herd, they run right into a trap. Most of them was kilt, the others shot an' captured. Nevada got away—the only one in the bunch. It was that Halfway sheriff, Wade, an' a posse."

Butch Cring seemed to swell; his face contorted terribly. "You!" he snarled, reaching and grabbing Celia. "You, an' your dancin' an' comeon stuff. You got me drunk more ways than one, an' I talked too much. That's why you're here. Spyin' for that sheriff. You kept eggin' me to take you to the hideout. Well, by hell, you'll see it tonight. Only, you won't never come back to spill your insides to no law!"

He whirled her to a door in the rear of the room. Her kimono swirled, giving a flashing glimpse of satiny flesh. She screamed, and he slapped her brutally across the mouth.

"Butch!" Kit cried. "Butch, you ain't going to take her, and kick me out. *You hear!*" She rushed at him, kicking and scratching.

Butch shoved Celia toward Ace. "Hold her," he blasted. He went to work on Kit. Celia shuddered, went limp. Even Ace and Kid turned their heads. Butch's fist dropped Kit. He stooped, got the front of her dress and tugged. Half of it ripped off, a tattered rag, in his hands.

The sight of her half clad body seemed to infuriate him more. Kit screamed with each brutal blow; finally the screams changed to a moaning whimper, gasps of pain.

Then silence. Her bruised flesh was marked with reddening welts; here and there a trickle of blood.

"Gimme her, an' come on," Butch rasped. He picked Celia up in his arms and stormed out the rear way.

A SUDDEN autumnal rain had started, driven before a chill wind. The girl shivered, moaned, was quiet again. She did not know when Butch mounted his horse, holding her before him, and headed for the hide-out in the Torment Mountains.

And their leaving was not five minutes gone when Siesta Frey, right hand gun-filled, leaped in through the back door. Bleak face wet with running drops of rain, he quivered there. On the floor, Kit Teague moaned, writhed weakly, painfully. Siesta was beside her, raising her in his arms.

"No go, cowboy," she mumbled thickly. "Maybe I live. Likely not. Butch, that devil! He's got that girl, damn her! and gone to his hide-out. Him and Ace and Kid."

"Where, Kit?" Siesta's voice was tight, corvine. Fear ran through him; a fear he could not understand.

"You'd never—never find it," Kid sighed. "But, but they'll have to stop at Red Yates' place, to get supplies and stuff they left there for emergency. That's your chance, cowboy. Kill Butch for—for—me."

Fainted, or dead? Siesta laid her back, felt her pulse, and got the rise and throb of it under his thumb. He rose and plunged out into the storm. Went to the corral, where they had taken his horse, and where a man watched for him should he return for it.

He failed to watch close enough. A gunbarrel was laid along his head, and a minute later, Siesta, like an enraged, awakened ghost, was driving through the storm.

Cold rain beat his face, he lost his hat. Limbs slashed at him and tore his clothes. Still he rode recklessly, desperately. Not alone for Red Yates and a whack at his killers; but for that girl, who had whispered that he did not understand.

He plunged across the meadow and into the quaking aspens, flung out of the saddle and kicked off his spurs. Gun in hand, he moved toward the cabin Red had so carefully built.

His heart hammered jerkily as he crept up on the place. No sign of life; no light. He groaned, pressed inward on the door. Sense alone assured him there was nobody inside. "God, they ain't going to stop here!" he cursed. "Yet, hell! They'd have to come near this place. Maybe I can track them into that notch."

He turned, stiffened. Butch's voice came to him above the drive of the rain, the rasp of leafless tree limbs, the keen of wind.

Somehow, he suddenly understood, he had missed them on the way, and arrived before them. A hell-suggesting grin thinned his lips as he shut the door and stood just inside of it.

He heard them dismount, and the jingle of their spurs as they came toward the cabin. The latch was fumbled, the door pushed inward. He heard Celia sob as she was shoved inside ahead of Butch. Siesta hadn't figured on her being

right in this gunplay. It had slipped his mind. He acted now—even though the move might certainly mean his life.

He leaped out, colliding with Butch Cring. "Shut and bar the door!" he yelled at Celia, as he and Butch went down, skidding in the mud.

Surprise was in Siesta's favor. Ace and Kid squawked like locoed parrots as they leaped back, yanking at their guns. Flame leaped out at them, striking upward from the ground. Ace Padus seemed to explode, breath bursting from him screamingly. Kid yelled, dropped, groveled in the mud as he pawed for his gun.

Butch was up, now, firing at the point where the flashes had come from. Cursing, Kid kneeled and followed suit. From a point near the corner of the cabin, sudden gunfire answered them. Kid grunted, rocked forward on his face, convulsive fingers raking into the mud.

Butch Cring cowered, backing away, firing at that point. Siesta ran around the cabin, laying a bullet at Butch's feet. The big man croaked, fear running high in him. "Damn you!" His voice broke scratchingly. He started to run.

"Stop 'er, you hog!" Siesta snarled. He fired close to Butch's head. Butch yelled, wheeled, fired crazily at this devil who so tormented him. A man, it seemed, who knew more of guns and gunmen than a human ought to know.

THE roll of gunfire was a continuous thing, deadly and deafening. And then it ceased, leaving a terrible quietude. Butch Cring straightened, and stared at that leaning, shadowy figure by the cabin. Butch's arms dropped, his guns thumping to the ground.

He commenced to bend, pressing both big hands to his stomach. He wobbled, making panting, grunting sounds. The bare tree limbs clacked like skeleton feet parading across cold granite; the wind whined mockingly.

"Uh—uh—" Butch panted, and plodded toward nowhere in particular. He dropped face down, then. His big bulk shuddered, was still.

"That's the only way a man can have peace with such buzzards," Siesta mumbled regretfully. "You bet!"

He went slowly to the door, knocked, raised his voice. "Me, Siesta," he said, and went on in. "They're gone, Miss Luane. They won't bother you. Can you find a match?"

He heard her glad cry; heard her fumbling about. A match flared, a lamp began to give yellow light.

She stood and stared at him, her kimono gaping to reveal soft curves. And then, forgetting herself, she was flinging herself into his arms, sobbing against his chest.

"Siesta," she said hysterically. "I like that name. I liked you when I saw you. But I was afraid. You see, I had a purpose in playing the part I did. Six months ago, my brother, a deputy from Halfway, was killed in Stonehouse, when he came hunting some sort of evidence against Butch Cring and his bunch. I came to get that information—and did. I sent word to Sheriff Wade about that rustling, and he laid the trap. Only, Butch wasn't in it. He didn't go with his men. Then—"

"I figured there was something behind it," Siesta said. "A girl like you wouldn't be exposing herself to them if she—"

She drew back, blushing, pulling the kimono about her.

"I like it, fine, though, if you go right ahead when I'm around," he chuckled. "I like it fine when you're close to me. I'd like it better if we'd get more acquainted, and maybe you'd like this place. A little Lady Godiva like you, should have some man around to tote the guns."

Her eyes held his and she swayed, drawn irresistibly toward him. The rain pattered on the roof, and she felt very nice and safe. She strained against him as he lifted her in his arms. Her breath was warm, eager, and she sighed delightfully as her rose-petal lips were crushed against his own. A flame ran throughout Siesta, shaking, searing him. He felt the sweetness, the softness of her in his arms.

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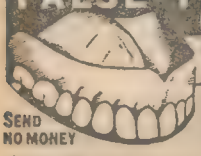

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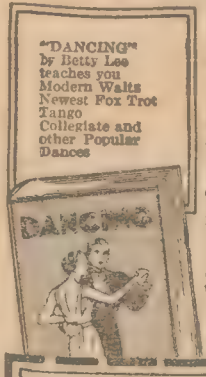

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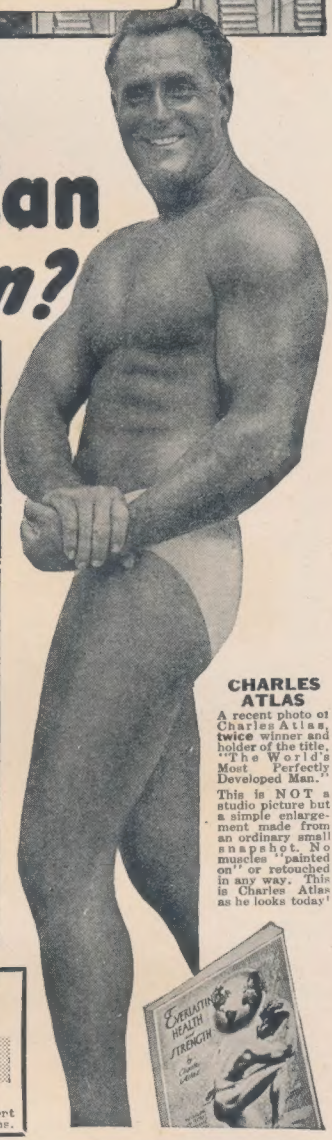

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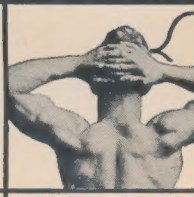

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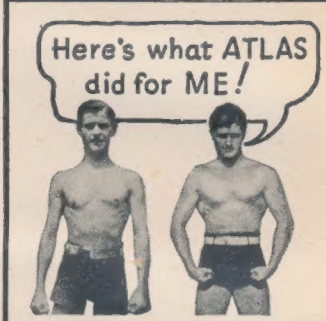

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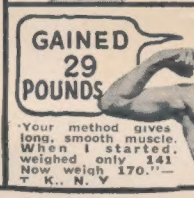

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